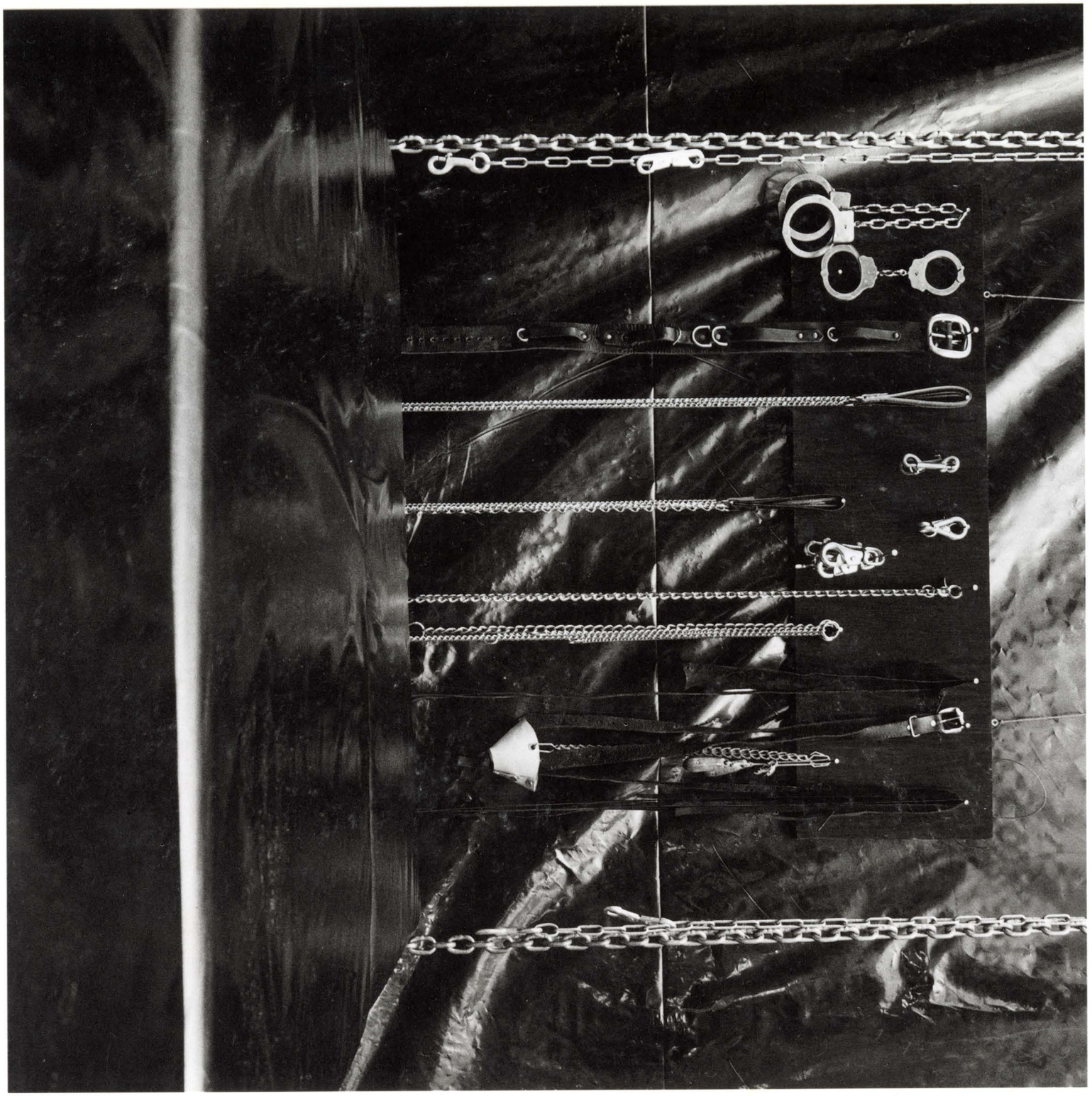
ROBERT

MAPPLETHORPE



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Pictures.

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

EDITED AND DESIGNED BY DIMITRI LEVAS

ARENA EDITIONS

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THAT FEELING IN THE STOMACH

"It was around 1980. I was twenty, and Robert was thirty-three," Edward Mapplethorpe explained, when I asked him when he discovered that his older brother, the late Robert Mapplethorpe, was gay. "He had basically cut himself off from the family, but I'd tried to stay in touch with him, and he'd gotten me on the guest list for a Patti Smith concert," he continued. "We had been backstage, and I didn't want to be the little brother getting in the way, so I said, 'You do your thing, and I'll go out and watch the show from the audience,' which I did. At one point I looked over at the speakers and there was Robert perched on top of one of them with a guy's arm around him. My reaction was surprise. The thought of it was easier than seeing it. This was the first time I had actually seen my brother in an intimate situation with a man. To tell you the truth, as a kid I was told Robert was married to Patti Smith. They'd had such an incredible relationship, and that's what he'd told our parents. In fact, I have a bunch of postcards that Patti sent to my mother in the early seventies, that say, 'Dear Mom.'"

By the time Edward spotted his brother with another man, Robert, who was born on November 4th in 1946, had been living his life as a gay man for a number of years. But it's not unusual that a person's family would be in the dark about the fact that he or she is gay. Double lives, or misrepresenting the details of one's life, particularly in the area of girlfriends or boyfriends, is an old tale for homosexuals. Fudging things has been a survival strategy for gay people for eons. Silence has been one too—which leads to why Mapplethorpe is an important figure. He may have committed that earlier sweet, sad lie when he pretended to his relatives that he'd tied the knot with his then lover Smith, and she may have been a partner in keeping the folks happy, but he sure didn't lie in his photography, which went for the truth like it was the only thing that mattered. In fact, Mapplethorpe's *modus operandi* was candor. His strongest work went against the silence that has so often surrounded the subject of homosexuality in a way which is unforgettable once you've seen the pictures.

There's no pretending some of them aren't shocking. Because they break taboos and don't try to be politically correct, they can be shocking on so many levels—race, sex, pain, beauty, politics, history, love. But surely the issue isn't their shock value, but whether they give us the

kinds of things for which we turn to art. I believe they do. Of course Mapplethorpe isn't the only artist to have broken the usual silence about homosexuality. There have been many in his generation or ones past, such as Oscar Wilde or Francis Bacon. Like these two artists, Mapplethorpe's story and work have a shape of their own, and the imagery pulses with the feeling of the times in which it was created. When they were first taken, Mapplethorpe's photographs signaled the changes that were going on with gay liberation in the seventies and eighties. Today they encapsulate that period. They articulate the hope, the craziness, the sense of emerging freedom, the battles of self-esteem, the fight to be proud of one's love, the defiance, the bonding, and so much more that gay people were experiencing. Although Mapplethorpe couldn't have anticipated this, as it turns out his photographs have also become an eloquent record of loss.

There has been a lot of attention on Mapplethorpe in the last twenty years. But despite it, not much has nailed why his work is really something. I think it has to do with how he dealt with stigmas against homosexuality, confronted taboos, and presented his content with such a sense of perfection and aesthetic sophistication. It's difficult to have the full view of Mapplethorpe as a taboo-breaker because most often it is not his taboo-breaking work that is seen. It has served to give the rest of his work a buzz, but it's often treated as "too hot to handle." His portraits, nudes, and flowers may have become a staple in photography shows, books, articles, and collections, but many of the sex pictures have remained like land mines that the photography world is afraid to touch. What a shame. This is to miss the full scope of what he did, and why his work matters. Explicit pictures of homosexual sex don't make up a huge proportion of his work, but they are its underbelly. This is the subject through which he found his photographic voice, and it's here that one can see the incredible balancing act between form and content that makes a Mapplethorpe really fly. That doesn't mean he didn't do other kinds of photographs that are memorable. He did. Plenty of his photographs have power, but the all-male sex pictures are where one sees him finding his place in history.

In any serious discussion anyone ever had with Mapplethorpe about the development of his vision, he'd always indicate that this imagery was pivotal to his art and his personal education. As he once explained, "I learned about my own sexuality through taking photographs of sexuality. It was all interrelated. It was as though I wasn't documenting anything but myself in a way." Of his sex pictures, the most difficult images for most people are the ones which depict sado-masochistic rituals. It is understandable why people have a hard time with these photographs. Witnessing a man choosing to have his genitals bolted down, tied up and strangled until they bleed—which is what one sees in certain Mapplethorpe images—is to encounter pain on many levels. But since when did art only cover "nice" things? Since when was art supposed to pretend

that certain things aren't a part of reality? Within his body of work Mapplethorpe shows a broad span of what occurs in sex between men—including pleasure. Mapplethorpe's images cover ground that definitely isn't represented in *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex, But Were Afraid to Ask.*

A compilation of his sex photographs, such as this book, is something Mapplethorpe wanted to organize for years. Although he continued to involve sex as an important element of his work, he shot all his "hard-core" images in the space of a few years. If one only heard about Mapplethorpe's most graphic images, instead of looking at them, one might think they resemble pornography. But there is a world of difference between a Mapplethorpe image and pornography. For a start, his subjects weren't for hire. The relationships depicted are real. As Mapplethorpe once bluntly said, "The people involved in those sexual pictures are really involved in what they were doing. It's their thing. If there was somebody that happened to be drinking piss in the photograph, he was, in fact, into drinking piss. He wasn't doing it for the pictures." The word "shocking" has been used often to describe his explicit pictures. I think what shocks isn't just the material, but how it is so artfully presented. The content, lighting, composition, sense of order and aesthetics all combine to give the photographs an unforgettable impact. If one listens to the comments of viewers as they absorb these images, one will often hear someone say with surprise, "I can't believe how beautiful they are." In fact, beauty was Mapplethorpe's bullet. He loved it, and he used it to wipe out old notions of the pitifulness of homosexuality. It shouldn't be forgotten that the men in Mapplethorpe's pictures, who came from all walks of life, wanted to be photographed. In a way these images always reminded me of Matthew Brady's civil war pictures, taken right before the soldiers went out to battle.

It's very rare that one comes across a Mapplethorpe in which one's first emotion is that the view is pathetic. The series which he informally titled "Baby Larry" is an exception. In these pictures one views a grown man completely done up like a baby—bib, bow, bonnet and all. Mapplethorpe catches the moment in one shot, when his subject has the kind of tantrum only babies usually get to enjoy. The infantilized man dumps a bowl of yuk on his head, and it drops down his face like a scene from the Marx Brothers. These "Baby Larry" shots are both heartbreaking and hilarious, and they feature something very rarely seen in a Mapplethorpe—mess. His work is usually impeccable. This gives the sex pictures all the more tension—because of how the sense of perfection contrasts with the fact that the images themselves bring up all sorts of "messy" issues.

Mapplethorpe admitted that he knew he had to do something shocking in order to make a name for himself, but his decision to involve sex in his work went beyond calculation. He didn't

refer to himself as brave, but he was. His is not the work of a coward. It took guts to do this kind of work in the art and photography worlds which existed then. Neither world had ever shown real support for visual work that was openly about homosexuality. It's different now than it was then. Skip twenty years or so and one sees Mapplethorpe's courage again in the self-portraits he did right before his death. Mapplethorpe wasn't an intellectual. He had street smarts, though, and was smart enough to know that what he felt, others might feel, too. What he said on this score is often quoted in one version or another:

> *The first time I went to [adult magazine] stores on 42nd Street and saw those [physique] pictures in cellophane, I was still straight and didn't even know that those male magazines existed. I was sixteen and not even old enough to buy them. I'd look in the window... and I'd get a feeling in my stomach. I was in art school then and thought, God–if you could get that feeling across in a piece of art...*

What's remarkable is that Mapplethorpe achieved this. His sharpest work goes right to the stomach and gets a visceral response. Many different feelings have been expressed by those who have seen these pictures. There are those who identify with the photographs, and those who say the images make them sick, with varying responses in between. But it's impossible to talk about the public reaction to this imagery without talking about his private reasons for doing it. As Mapplethorpe himself said, his photography was a means to learn—about himself, sex, homosexuality and life. It was also a means to make something beautiful which was often considered ugly.

During the early seventies, even before he shot the images in this book, he was taking hundreds of Polaroids, many of which were self-portraits. Mapplethorpe is often naked in them, or wearing some provocative item. Qualifying these images in the context of his later work, one might say these earlier Polaroids—like the objects he made by cutting out pages from pornographic magazines—were the prologue of the drama to come. They are exercises in self-discovery and photographic seeing. These shots feel very personal. This is also true of his Polaroids of men kissing one another, and engaging in sexual contact, or his images of friends like Marianne Faithful, Candy Darling and Lucy Ferry. Among the gang is Sam Wagstaff, who played a monumental part in Mapplethorpe's life as a lover, teacher, friend, benefactor and someone who believed fiercely in his pictures.

By the time Mapplethorpe hooked up with him, Wagstaff was legendary as a curator who

understood new art, and as an independent thinker. He had stopped working and was enjoying the life of a free man, with money to spend as a collector. Even though Wagstaff already had decades of developing his eye before he met Mapplethorpe, it was the young photographer who turned Wagstaff onto photography in a serious way that made him a champion of the medium. There are many parallels between Wagstaff as a photography collector and Mapplethorpe as a photographer. Wagstaff's collection, now housed at the Getty Museum in California, brought down the walls of the photographic canon. Wagstaff disregarded the history of photography as it had been written and went at it from a different angle. Ultimately, he showed that many more things belong in the pearly gates of what is considered art than what we are usually taught. Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff educated themselves about photography together. One sees that education at work in Mapplethorpe's pictures. There's a consciousness of photographic history—of, say, the achievements of Fox Talbot, Nadar, Cecil Beaton, George Platt Lynes, and Diane Arbus—which is the foundation upon which he built his imagery. Take the way he used lighting. Mapplethorpe learned about glamorous lighting from the work of George Hurrell, one of the Hollywood greats, and translated it brilliantly into his own work. Nowhere is this clearer than in his graphically explicit sex pictures. Rather than hide details that usually aren't shown because they are considered scandalous or dirty, Mapplethorpe lights them for all the world to see, as if they were Garbo's face.

An intimate, personal approach was essential to Mapplethorpe's way of working. This was not a photographer who used big crews and many assistants when he went at it. There's no way he could have captured the images he did, had he done that. He didn't consume reams of film the way so many commercial photographers do. Dimitri Levas, who designed this book and worked with Mapplethorpe throughout the eighties, remembers, "It's as though he would see an image before he took it. When it came to shooting the picture, he knew exactly what he was going to focus on. In a regular portrait session he'd begin by chatting with someone for a bit of time, all the while checking out how they talked and moved. Then when he'd get them in front of the camera, he'd know exactly what he wanted to capture. I'll bet that's how he worked on the sex pictures, too. He'd look at a scene and see what the essence of it was and try to figure out how to make it into a perfect form." Levas recalls something else that's vital to understanding Mapplethorpe: "He was so consciously aware of himself as an artist. One could see it in the way he lived his life, the way he presented himself, the way he presented his work." Indeed, when Mapplethorpe went for some of his most taboo-breaking shots, the furniture—which is used like an altar—isn't just any old chair, but one by Gustav Stickley. When he took his picture of a man role-playing as a "policeman," he had him "sit guard" on a Charles Eames chair. Where else can

one find an S&M scene featuring a flawless Biedermeier bed? Much has been written about the way Mapplethorpe's Catholic upbringing informed his aesthetic. It, of course, also informed his rebellion against sexual taboos.

Sometimes a situation couldn't be shaped into something that had the aesthetic rigor that Mapplethorpe insisted upon. When things didn't pan out, Mapplethorpe didn't push it. He took it as fate. As Levas points out, "He'd always say it wasn't meant to be. The word 'magic' was an important part of his vocabulary. 'Magic,' for instance, was the way he described pictures that turned out great by some unforeseen technical accident, such as a lighting misfire or the bump of a camera. And he'd always talk about the magic of the moment."

To Mapplethorpe there were elements of fate and magic involved in the fact that he was an artist who found himself in the middle of a world that was uprising. Toward the end of his life, in a BBC interview he said, "It was a certain moment, and I was in a perfect situation [to represent it], in that most of the people in those photographs were friends of mine, and they trusted me. I felt almost an obligation to record those things somehow. I thought, well here I am. I have a certain vision and it's an obligation for me to make pictorial images that nobody has ever seen before and do it in a way that's aesthetic."

Sometimes Mapplethorpe's sex pictures are so obviously provocative that they're plain old funny, such as his famous self-portrait with a whip going up his backside. Sometimes they're surrealistically bizarre, like his shots of a man who has his mouth plugged with clothespins. These images are reminiscent of the performance work done later by the British artist Leigh Bowery. Other Mapplethorpe pictures have the elements of absurdity that occur in life at the strangest times. As Levas says, "There are photographs that remind me of *The Bell Jar* where Sylvia Plath writes that seeing male genitals for the first time reminded her of a turkey neck and gizzards." Then there are Mapplethorpe's darkest photographs—his toughest scenes of crime and punishment, and self-hate. The sight of a swastika in the midst of a picture that is about power, domination and obedience, as happens in a few of Mapplethorpe's pictures, can be understandably horrifying to many human beings. There's too much history involving the swastika to be casual about it. Why do the very people the Nazis would have wanted eliminated appropriate Nazi symbolism in their reenactments of power and submission? Many people have tried to untangle this awful paradox, but to me none have hit it in a way that feels more to the point than philosopher Michel Foucault, who used his own experiences as a homosexual to try to unravel these kinds of questions. In "Sade: Sergeant of Sex," he said:

The Nazis were charwomen in the bad sense of the term. They worked with brooms and dusters, wanting to purge society of everything they considered unsanitary, dusty, filthy; syphilitics, homosexuals, Jews, those of impure blood, Blacks, the insane. It's the foul petit bourgeois dream of racial hygiene that underlies the Nazi dream. . . The problem raised is why we imagine today to have access to certain erotic phantasms through Nazism. Why these boots, caps, and eagles that are found to be so infatuating, particularly in the United States?. . . Is the only vocabulary that we possess for transcribing the grand pleasure of the body in explosion this sad fable of a recent political apocalypse? Are we unable to think the intensity of the present except as the end of the world in a concentration camp? You see how poor our treasure of images is!

Foucault also wrote about seventies style in which so many gay men appropriated signs and symbols of "obvious" masculinity—such as sideburns, beards and as much leather as possible. The fashion parade of the era, and the role playing that went with it, is well represented in Mapplethorpe's photographs. Their inventory of types include: policeman, cowboy, Nazi weirdo, biker, and lone rangers.

I didn't see either of the exhibitions that occurred in 1977 and 1978 when Mapplethorpe was right in the middle of doing many of the sex pictures. These shows are now legendary. They took place at "alternative spaces" in New York and San Francisco, because Mapplethorpe was already having exhibitions in galleries in these cities and it was thought these particular pictures were too controversial. Instead of cutting them out entirely, alternative shows were organized so this work could be seen along with the rest of his production. (The invitations on the covers of this book go back to that time in 1977 when Mapplethorpe's work was exposed in New York with two concurrent exhibitions.) The next year he had two simultaneous exhibitions in San Francisco. Photography dealer Jeffrey Fraenkel vividly remembers what happened when a selection of the sex pictures hit the West Coast and were presented at 80 Langton Street:

The opening was packed. The word was out. No one could have predicted sex pictures like these. They were photographed so carefully, lit so beautifully and sensitively, and presented in such an artful manner. There is no shortage of sex pictures in photography, but with these pictures, unlike, say,Victorian photography, there was no aspect of shame, no feeling that

they should only be viewed privately or secretly. With Robert's work you never got the feeling that anybody was being coerced. You definitely got the feeling that people were busting out after decades of holding back. They were placing this out for everyone to see. I think a lot of people connected with that sense of defiance.

AIDS is now in the back of many people's minds when looking at these pictures. How could it not be—even though no one knew anything about AIDS when all this was going on and the photographs were being done. Many of the subjects in these pictures have died due to the disease, as did Mapplethorpe himself. It was right after he died in 1989 that the Corcoran Gallery in Washington canceled the exhibition of his work, "The Perfect Moment," because of institutional fears about the public's reaction to his work about sex. In fact, when the same show went up elsewhere in Washington, it was proven that the audience, which went in droves, appreciated the opportunity to see what he had done. At the time, I wrote a piece in the *New Yorker* about two photographers: one who censored himself, Minor White, and one who didn't, Robert Mapplethorpe. The article included the following passage:

Mapplethorpe didn't consider his condition God's punishment. He understood it for what it was —a virus, not a sign that he had sinned. He had no shame about AIDS. . . [But] the outcome of the Corcoran's cancellation of Mapplethorpe's show has been a debate in which his photographs have been treated by some as though they were a disease that curators have to be careful about exposing to the public.

Ten years have gone by. AIDS is still a disease that needs to be eradicated, but enormous progress has been made in treating it. There's been progress, too, in terms of the public's understanding of the disease. Isn't it time that there was progress about understanding the public as well? We are always hearing about how the public can't handle this or that. Isn't it time that people stopped appointing themselves the guard dogs of culture, and started to let the audience determine what they want to see? I know Mapplethorpe had great faith in the audience's ability to look at all of his work. That's why he always wanted to publish a book of sex pictures. Here it is. I don't think he could have known the layers and levels that this work would eventually take on. But here's how he summed up what he did, "I captured something at a certain time that couldn't be captured anymore." How true.

—Ingrid Sischy

"The first time I went to [adult magazine stores on] 42nd Street and saw those [physique] pictures in cellophane, I was still straight and didn't even know that those male magazines existed. I was sixteen and not even old enough to buy them. I'd look in the window ... and I'd get a feeling in my stomach. I was in art school then and thought, God–if you could get that feeling across in a piece of art..."[1]

"I would prefer a sexual experience to photographing one. The camera gets in the way, although I have always made an effort to use it."[2]

"I photographed sexuality right from the start ... because it is a great obsession of mine and, I think, of everyone else['s], if they were honest. Anyway, I had the idea of taking sexual images and doing it a little differently than it had been done before—having a formalist approach to it all, which I hadn't seen in photography or pornography ...So I set out to do that. Those photos certainly got me a certain amount of notoriety although they were [almost] never even shown as a real sort of unit – [instead it was] one here and one there – but everybody knew about them. I still get a lot of negative press [because of them], especially in the gay world. Those people didn't want that stuff to be shown. It didn't go over very well and it made other people see a kind of negativity in everything I was doing instead of the other way around. I thought if they could see how I could photograph a flower and then see that the same eye was photographing something else, they would see those pictures differently. But it didn't work that way."[3]

"Taking pictures of sex ... if you're a voyeur, fine, but it's not sex."[4]

"I made a great effort to take those pictures. But so did the people in them. They weren't doing it for money, they believed in what they were doing at that time."[5]

"Sex is an experience that has no parallels anywhere. It goes beyond any experience I know of otherwise."[6]

"I would say I learned a lot about my own sexuality through ... taking my own photographs of sexuality. It was all interrelated. It was as though I wasn't documenting anything but myself in a way. I wasn't just going through the ads in the paper trying to get people with odd sexual tastes. It was people I had gotten to know something about and we became friends and then I took pictures of them."[7]

"The people involved in those sexual pictures were really involved in [what they were doing]. It's their thing; if there was somebody that happened to be drinking piss in the photograph, he was, in fact, into drinking piss. He wasn't doing it for the pictures."[8]

"I don't like the word 'erotic'. I think it's pretentious. 'Erotic Art' – either it's art or it's not art. Erotic Art seems to connote something that isn't quite good enough to be art."[9]

"...But what happened is they took the [photographs of] cocks and they fused them on the other [photographs], instead of the other way around. They forgot that the other pictures were even there."[10]

"I wanted people to see that even those extremes could be made into art. [I wanted to] take those pornographic images and make them somehow transcend the images [of pornography]. And I think the best of those pictures do that, again because of the composition. I think that's an accomplishment. It was a problem that I'd set out to solve."[11]

"I was enthusiastic about people experimenting with themselves. I was trying to get them to understand something, not intimidate them."[12]

"I was in a position to take those pictures—I was rather obsessive about it. They were mostly friends of mine. It was the early 70s. You couldn't do it today."[13]

—Robert Mapplethorpe

Self Portrait, 1980

Helmut, NYC, 1978

Leatherman, 1980

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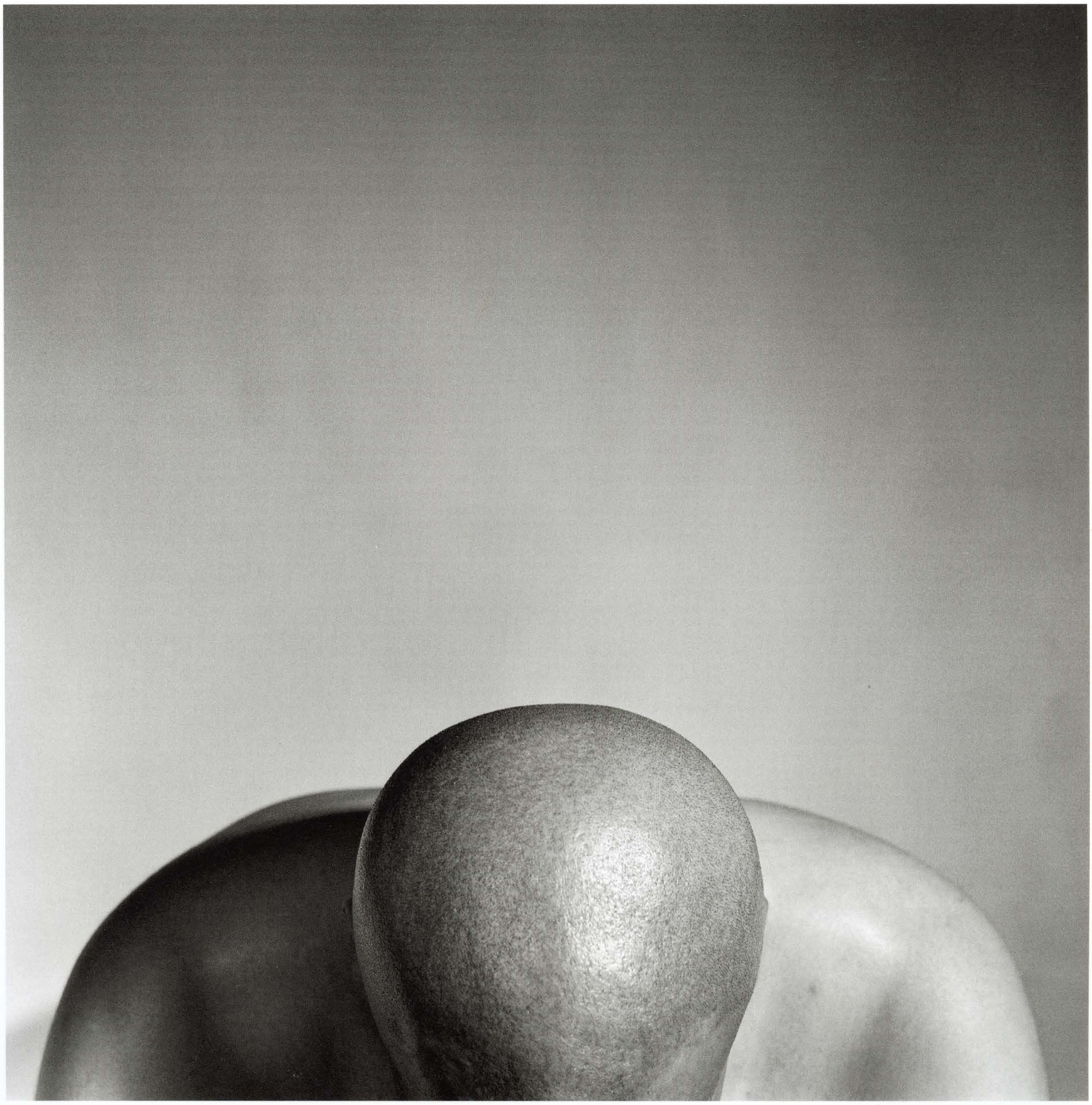
Leather Mask, 1980

Cynthia Slater, 1980

Patrice, 1977

Cedric, 1977

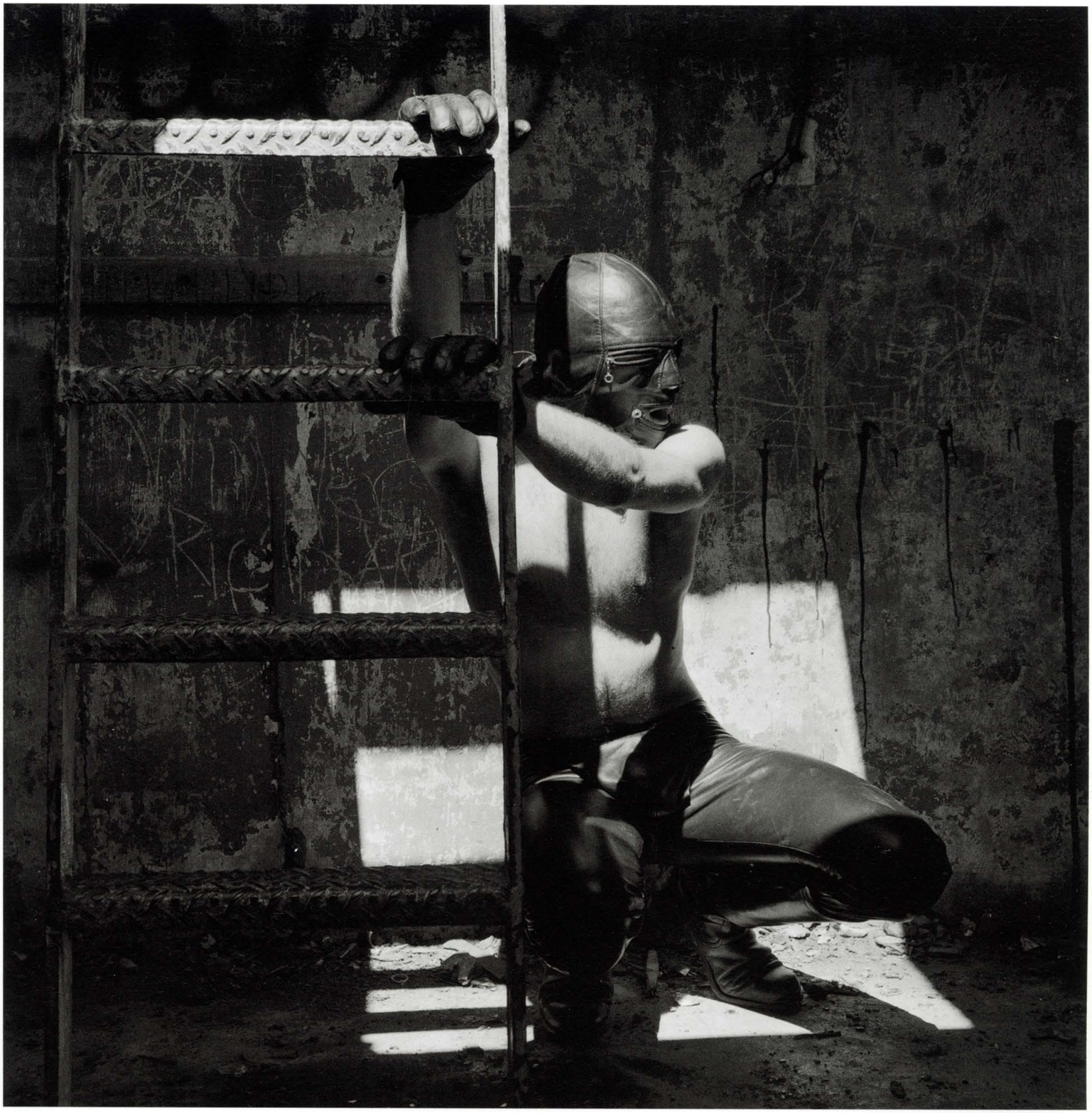


Helmut's Ass, 1978

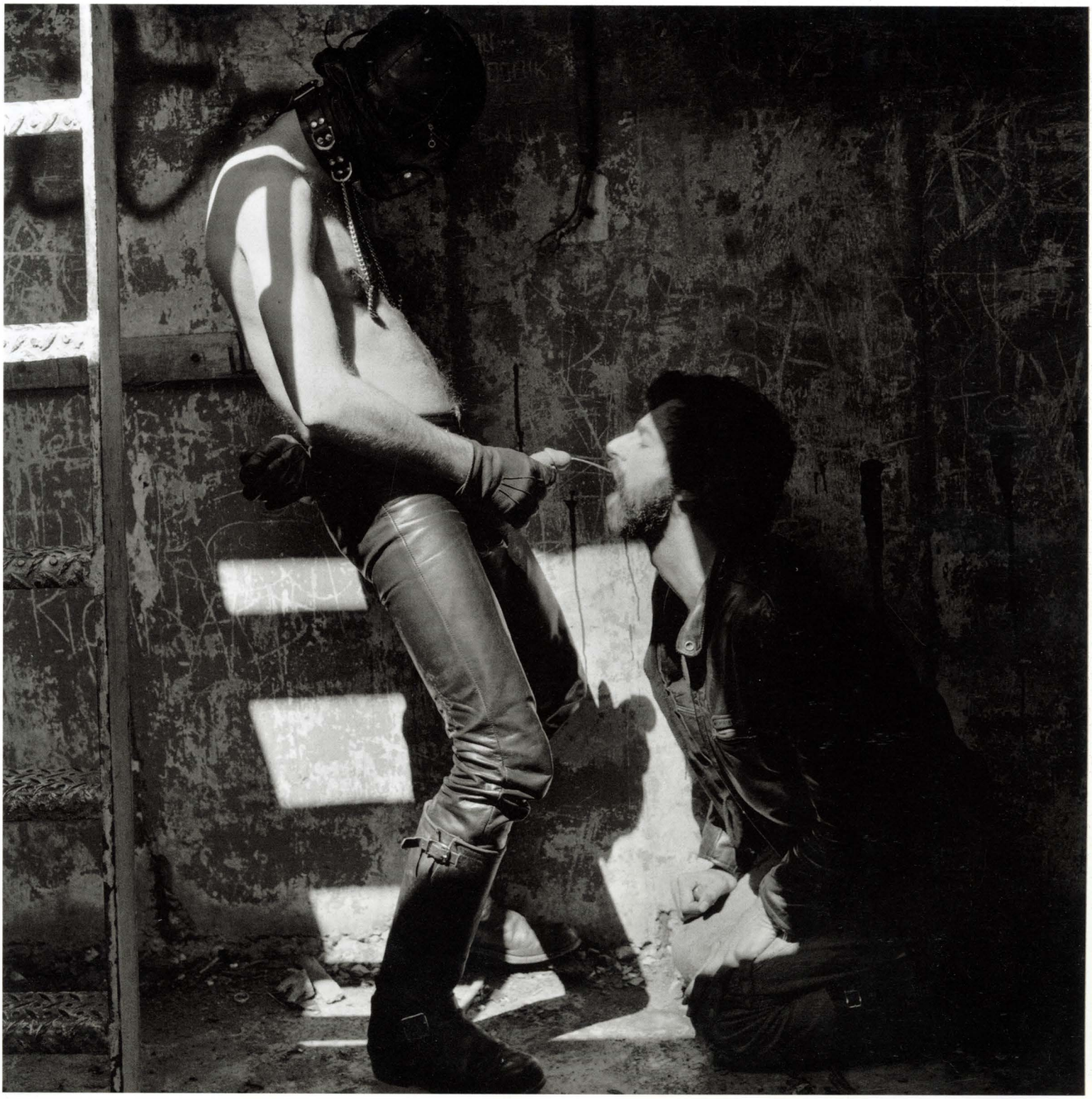
Joe, NYC, 1978

Joe, Rubberman, 1978

Jim, Sausalito, 1977



Jim and Tom, Sausalito, 1977



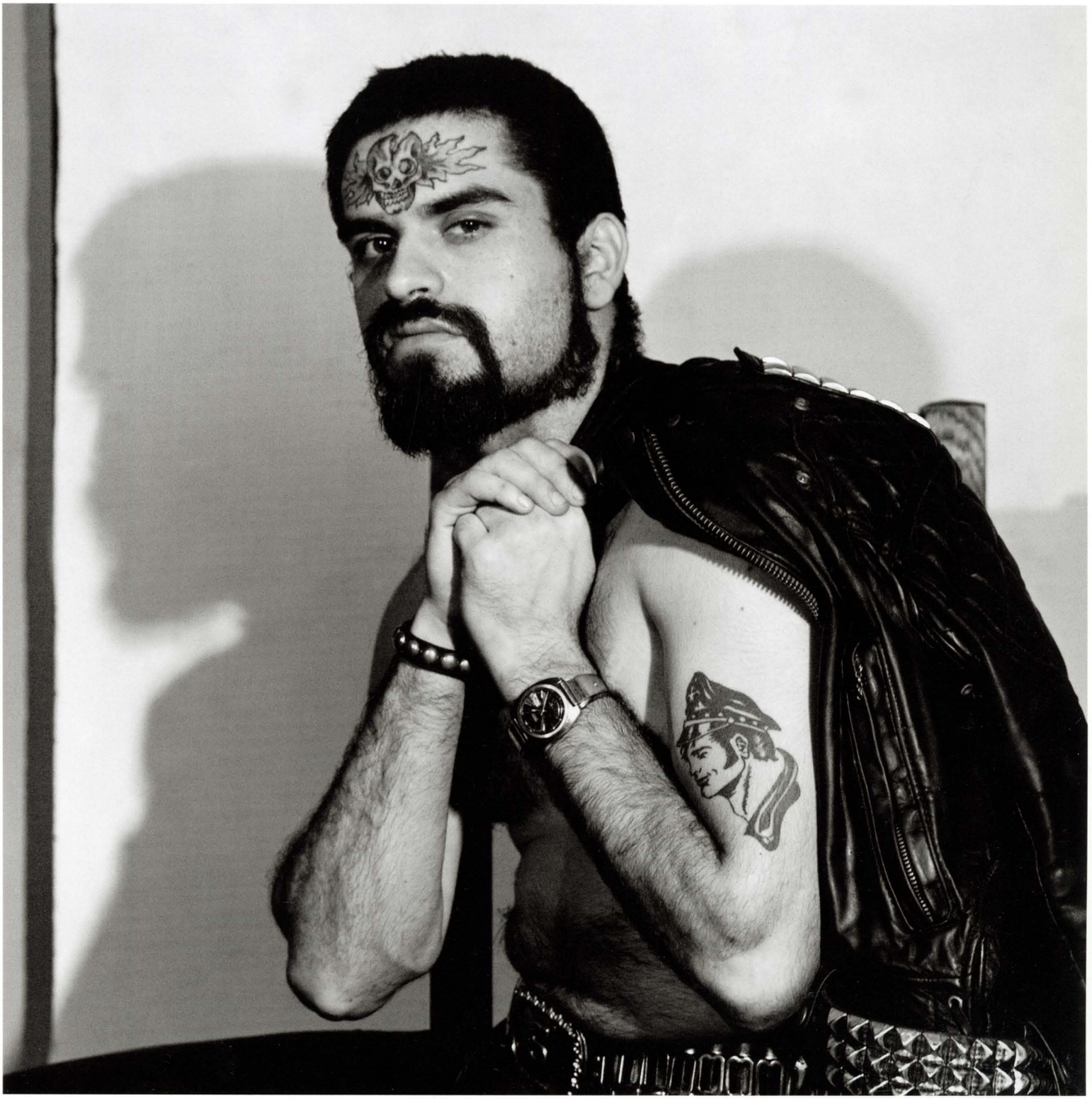
Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter, 1979

Lyle Heeter, 1979

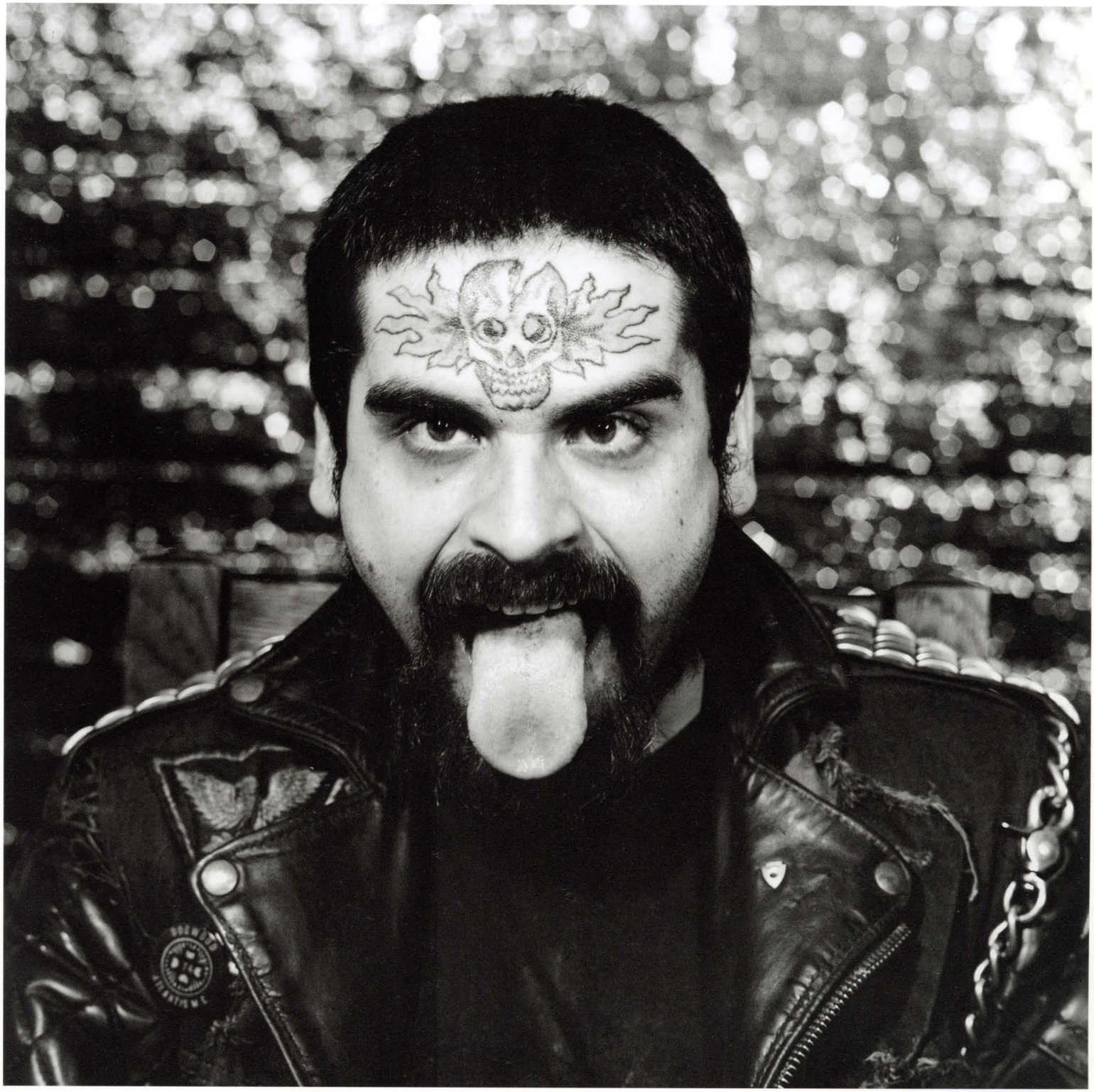
Self Portrait, 1978

Mark Stevens, Mr. 10 1/2, 1976

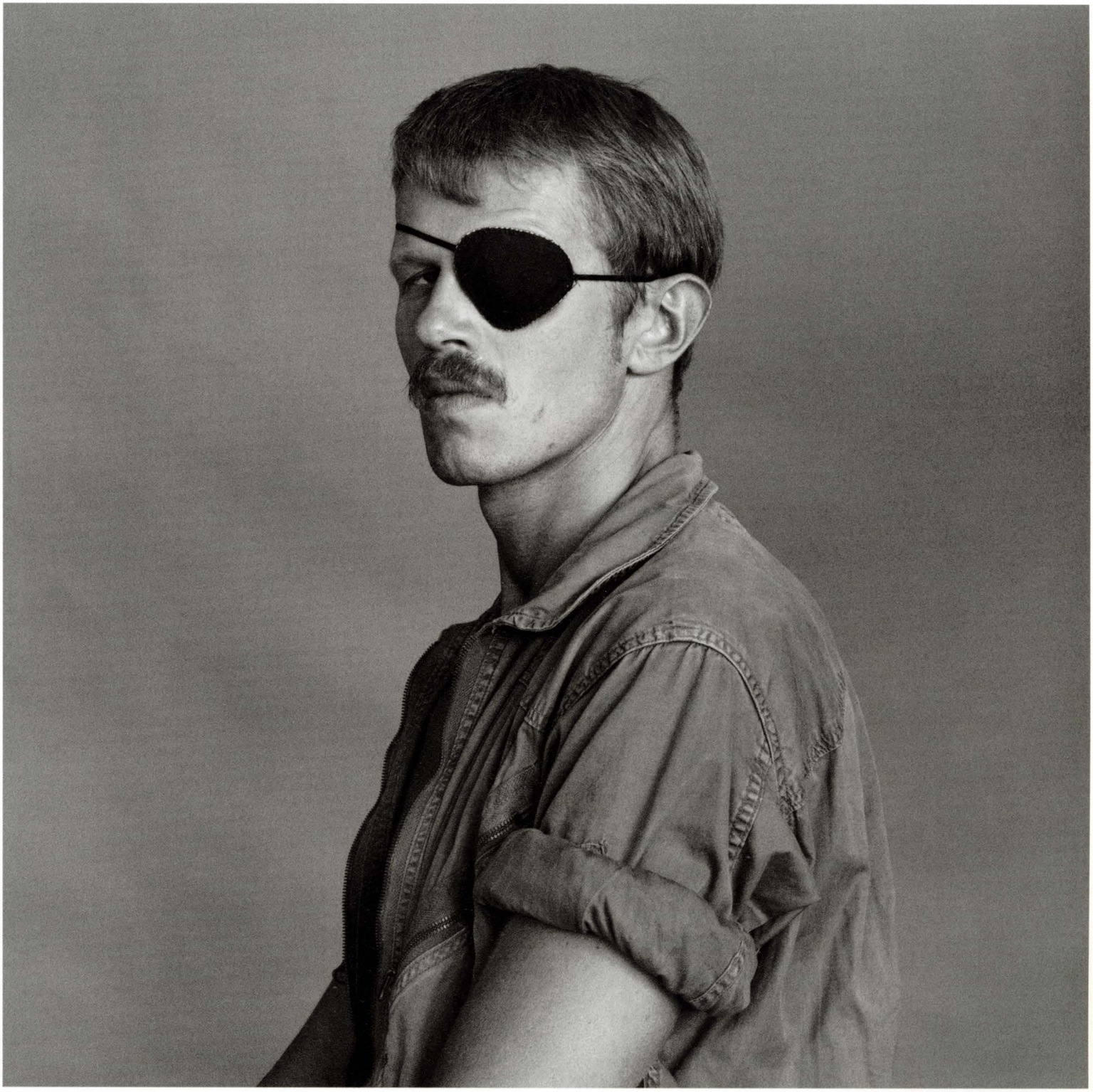
Nick, 1977



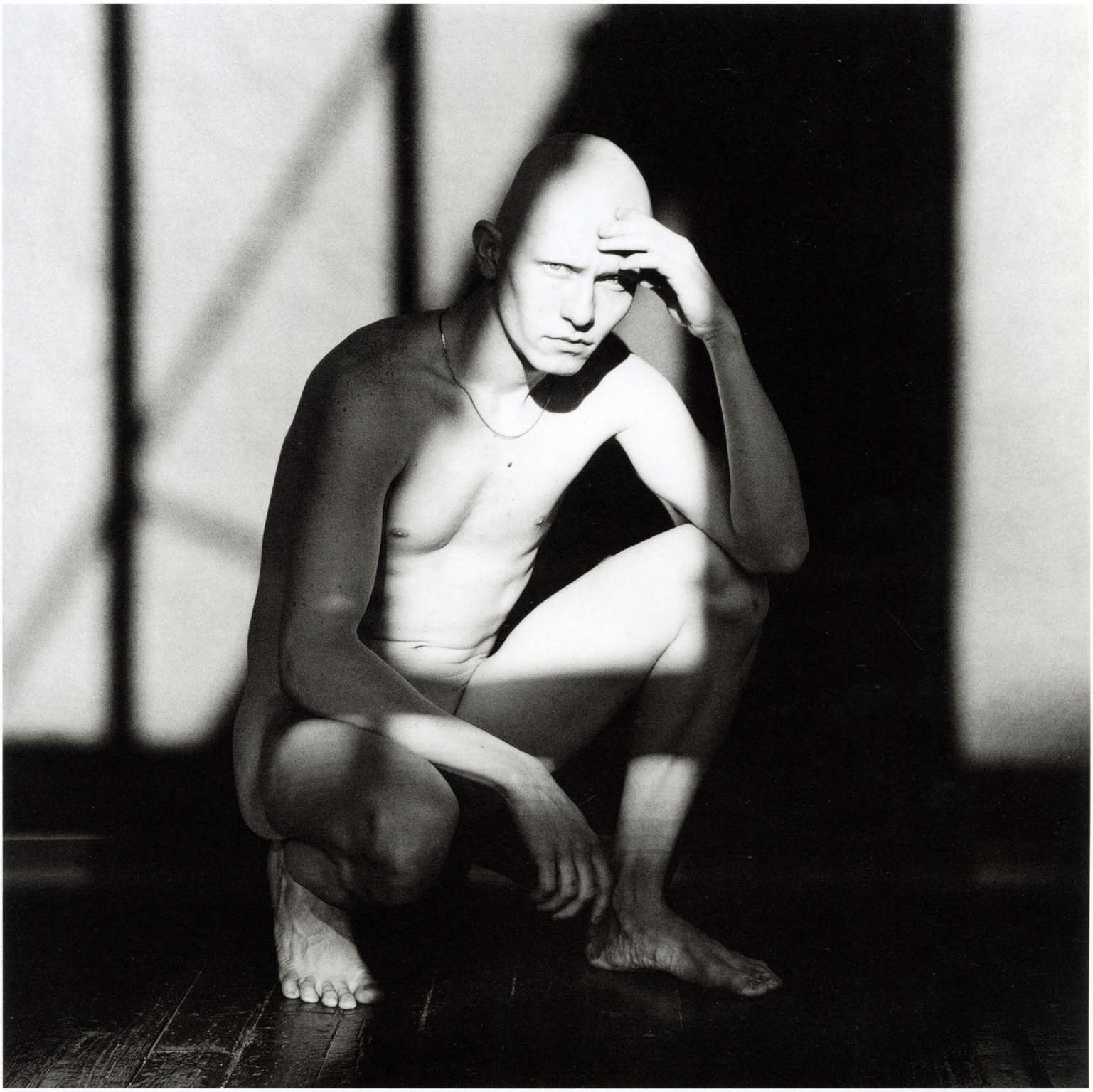
Nick, 1977



Keso Dekker, 1979



Robert Sherman, 1978



Baby Larry, 1978

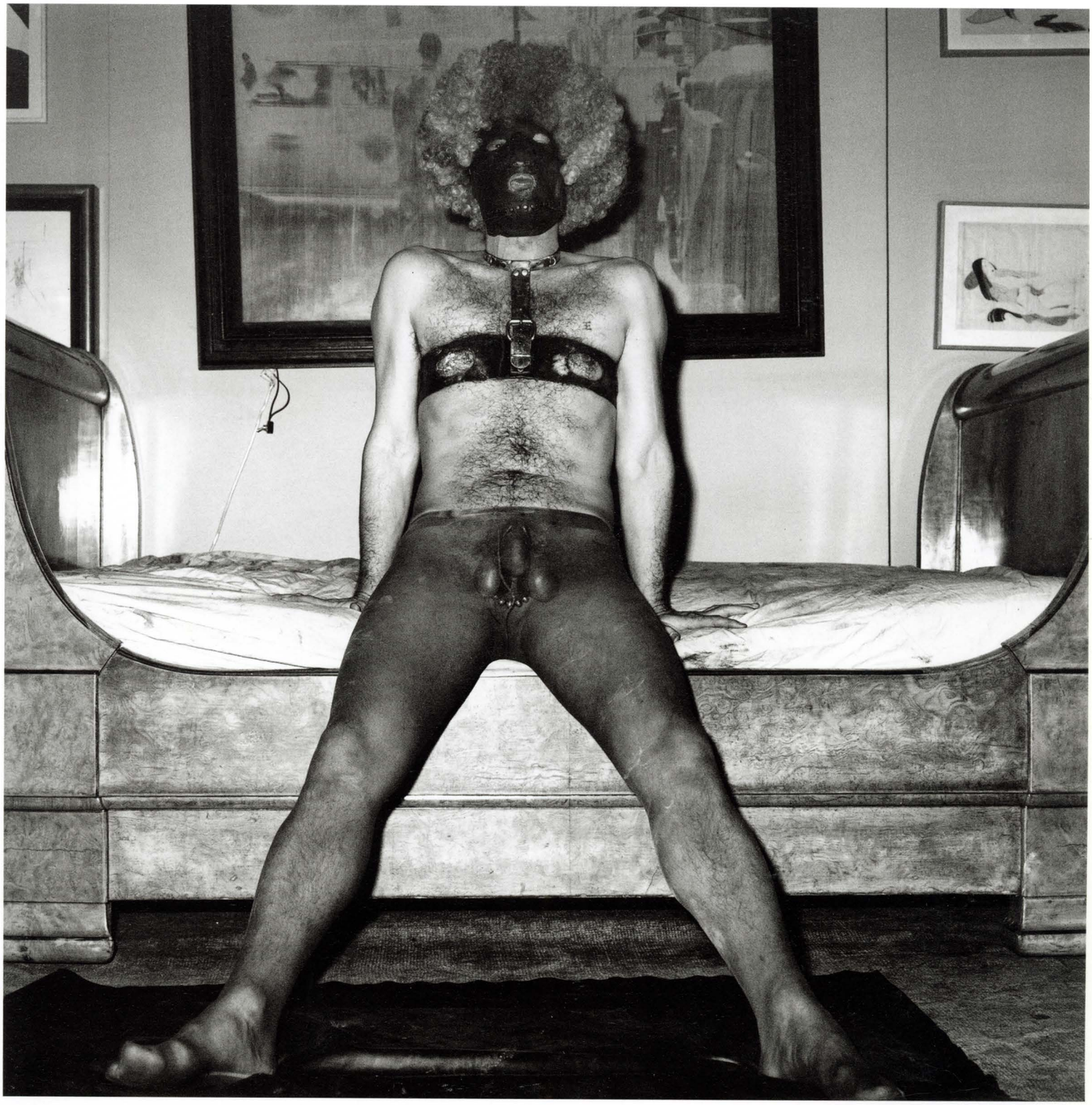
Baby Larry, 1978

Baby Larry, 1978

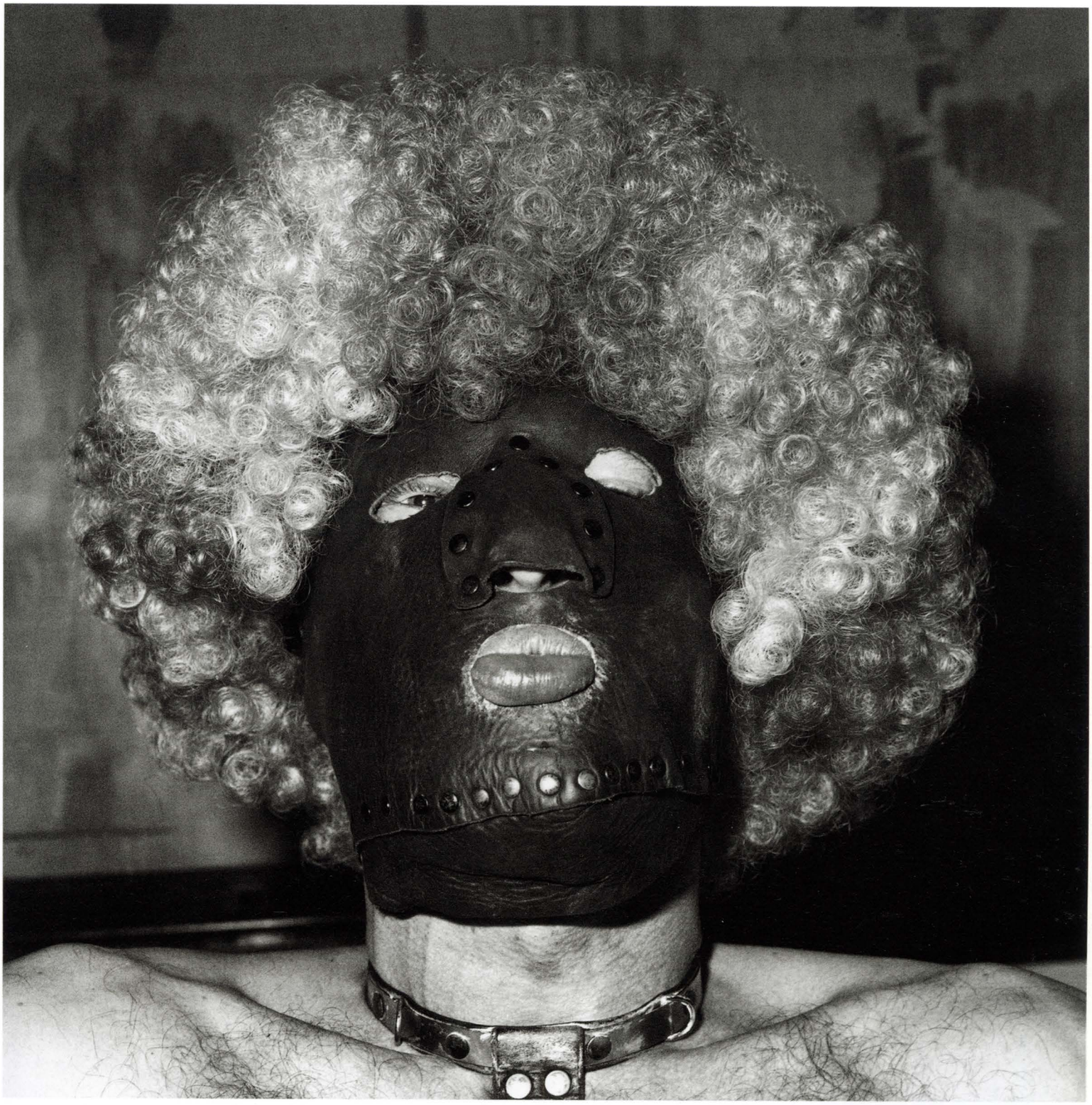
Baby Larry, 1978

Baby Larry, 1978

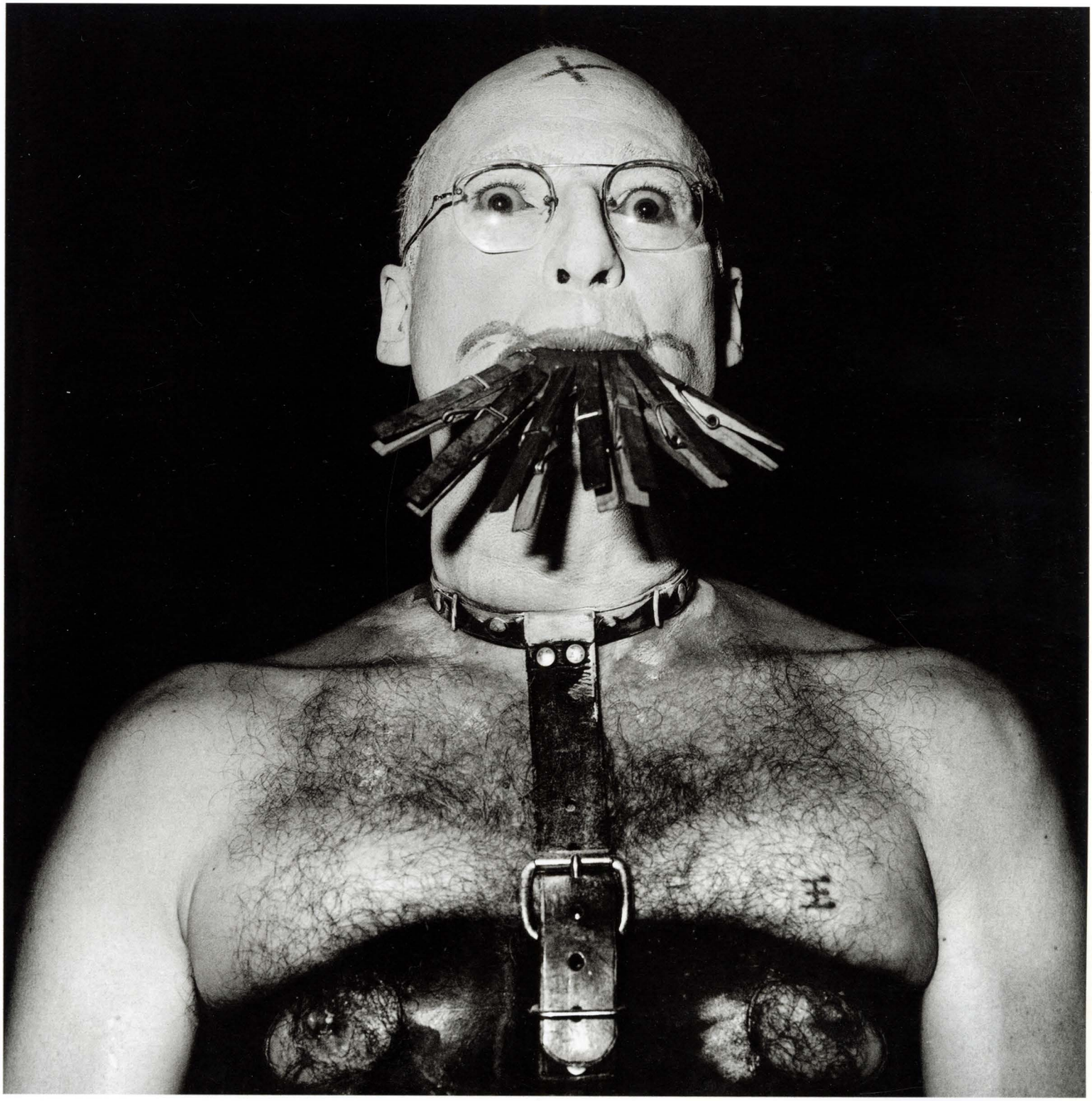
Richard, 1978



Richard, 1978

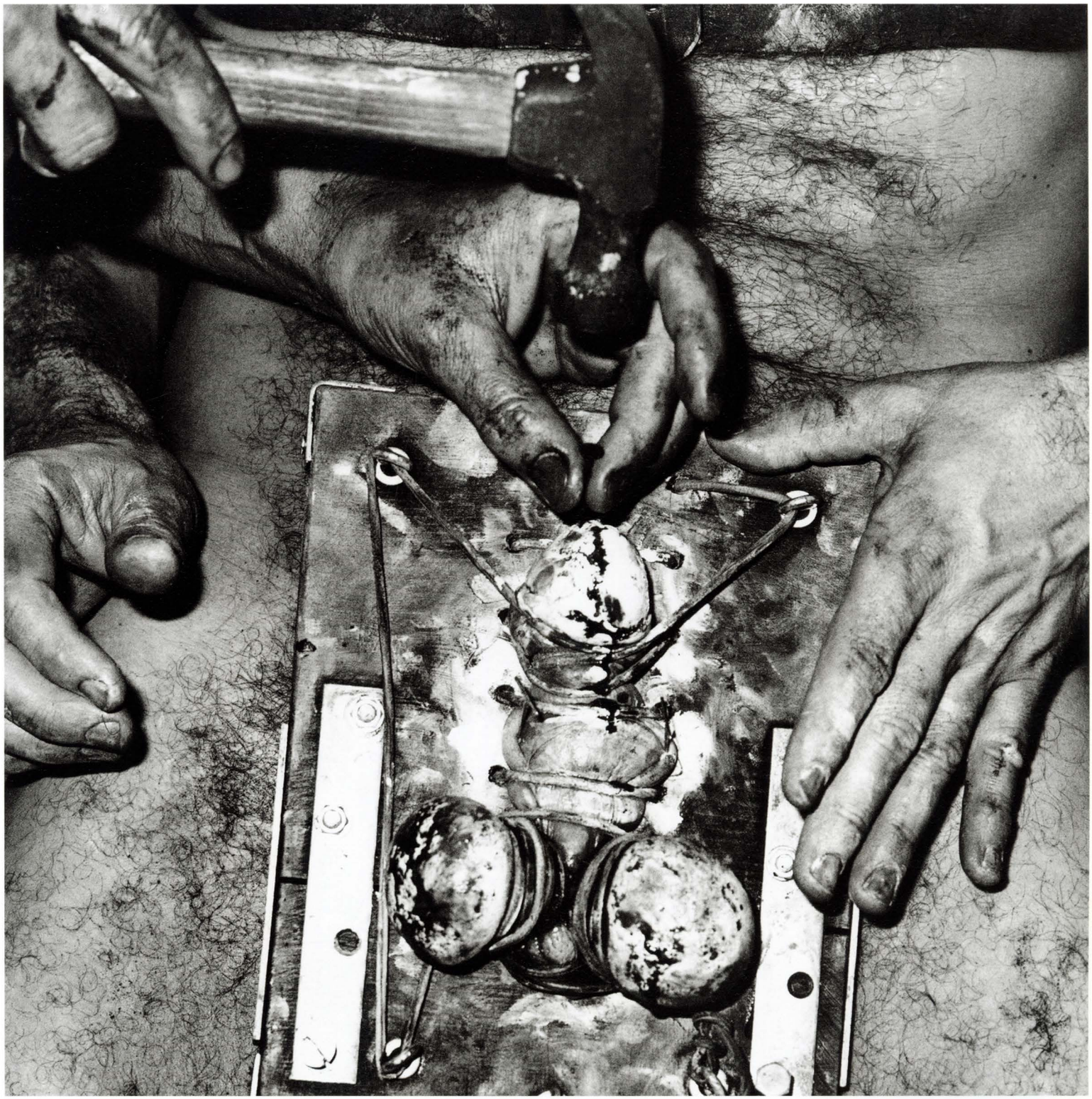


Clothespinned Mouth, 1978

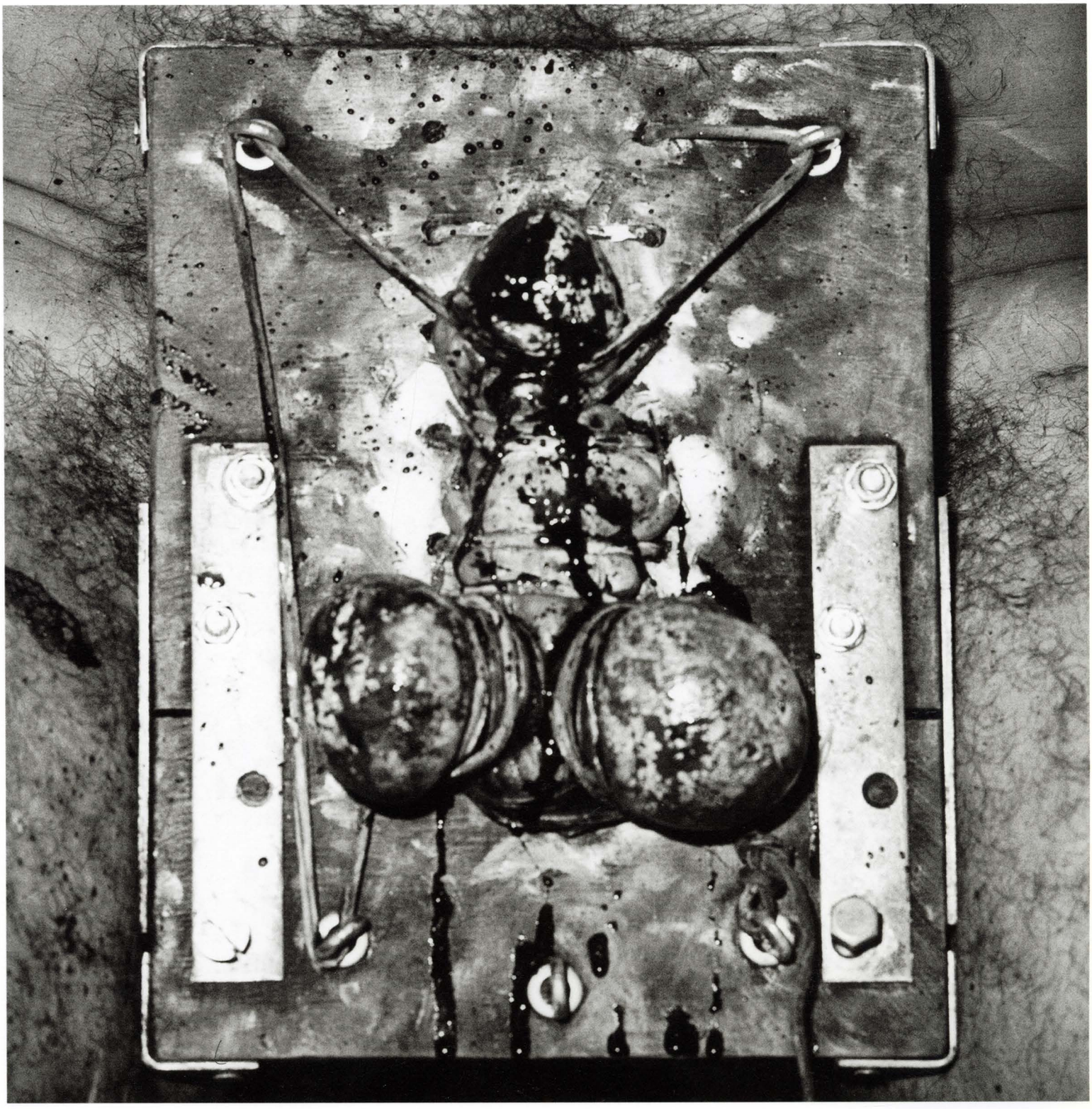


Clothespinned Mouth, 1978

Richard, 1978



Richard, 1978



Richard, 1978

Patrice, 1977

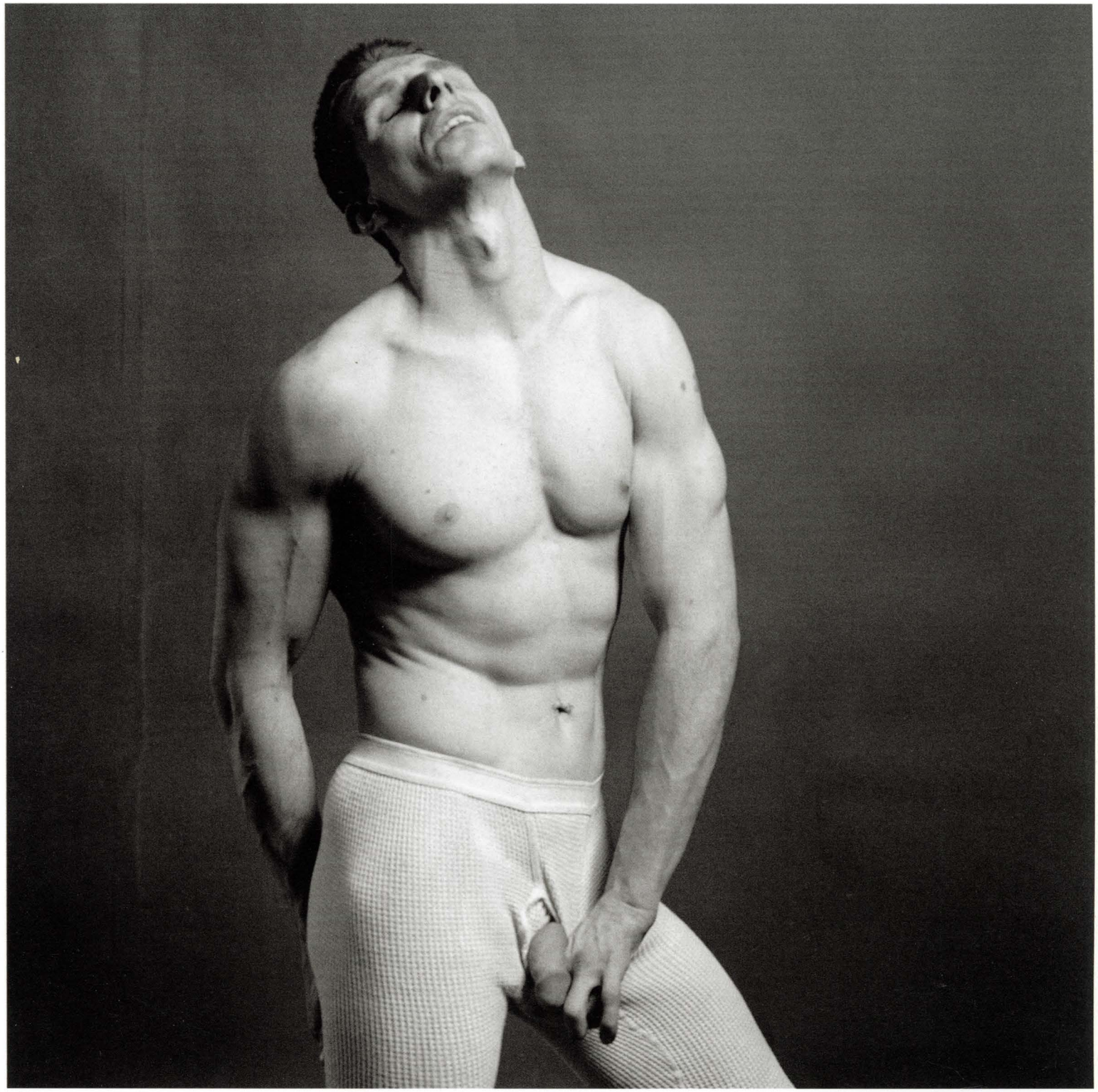
Patrice, 1977

Bud
Durable Knit
MEDIUM
MACHINE WASH WARM WATER

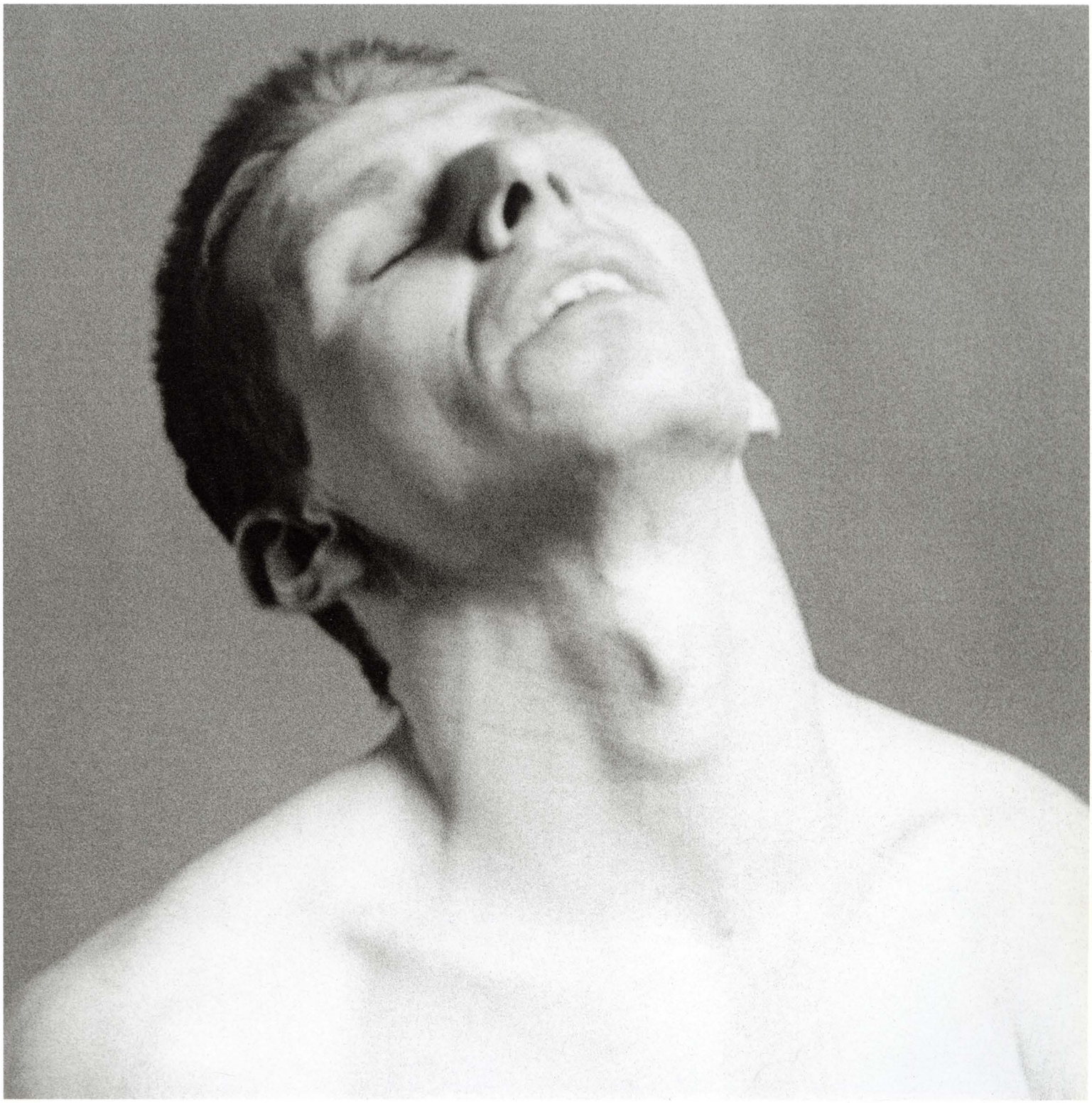
Patrice, 1977

Peeing in Glass, 1977

Larry, 1979

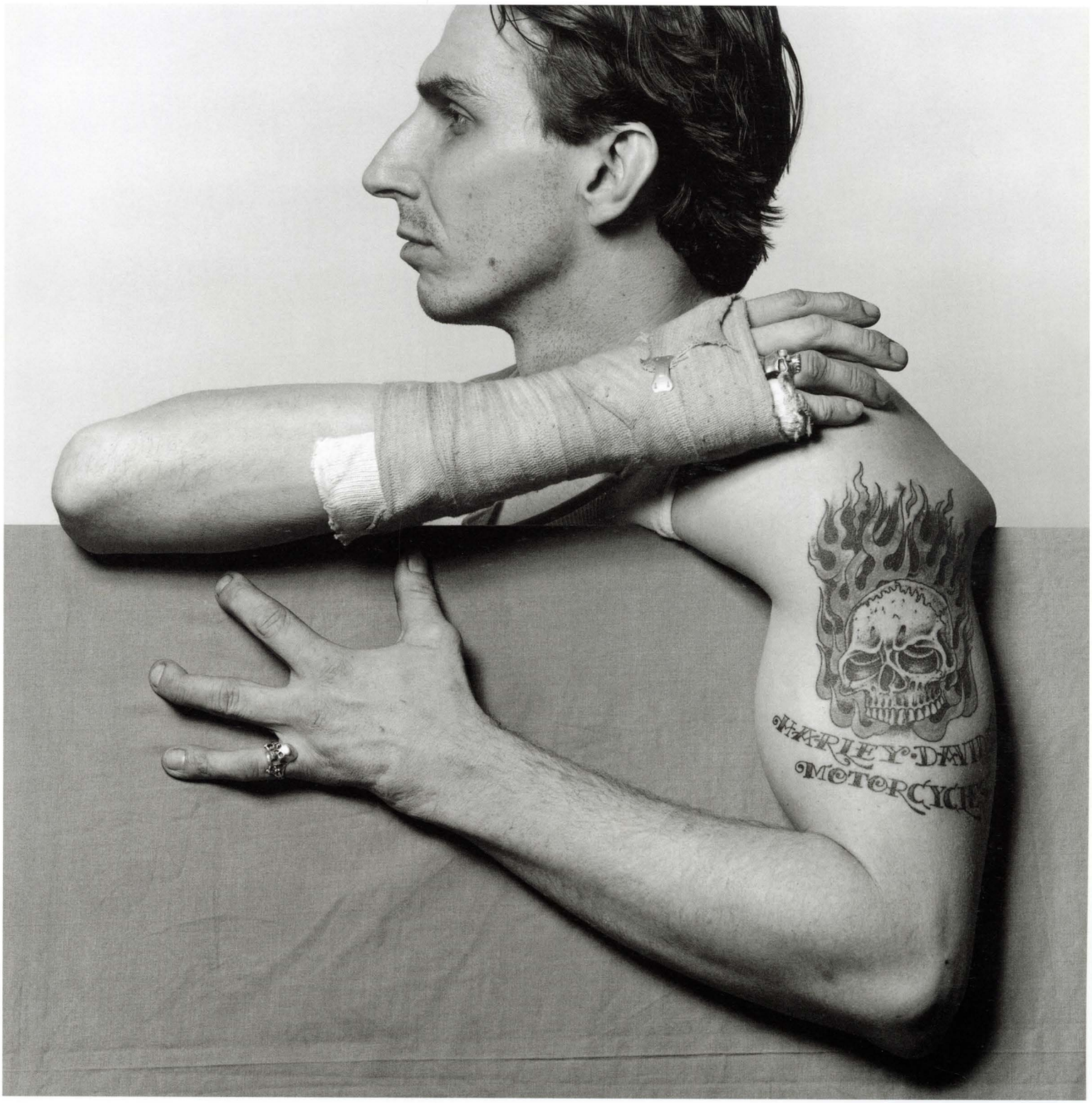


Larry, 1979



Larry and Bobby Kissing, 1979

Larry, 1981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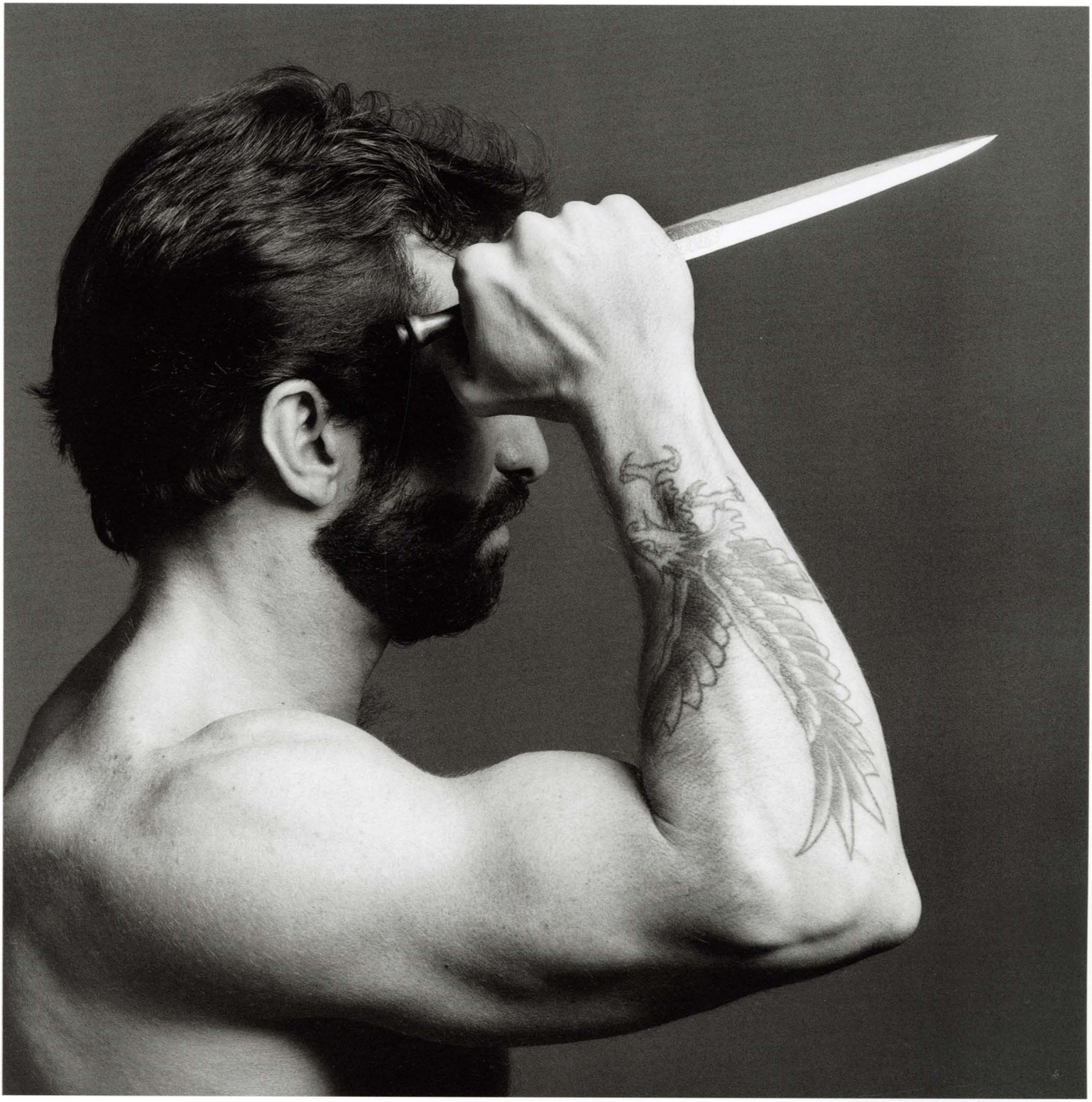
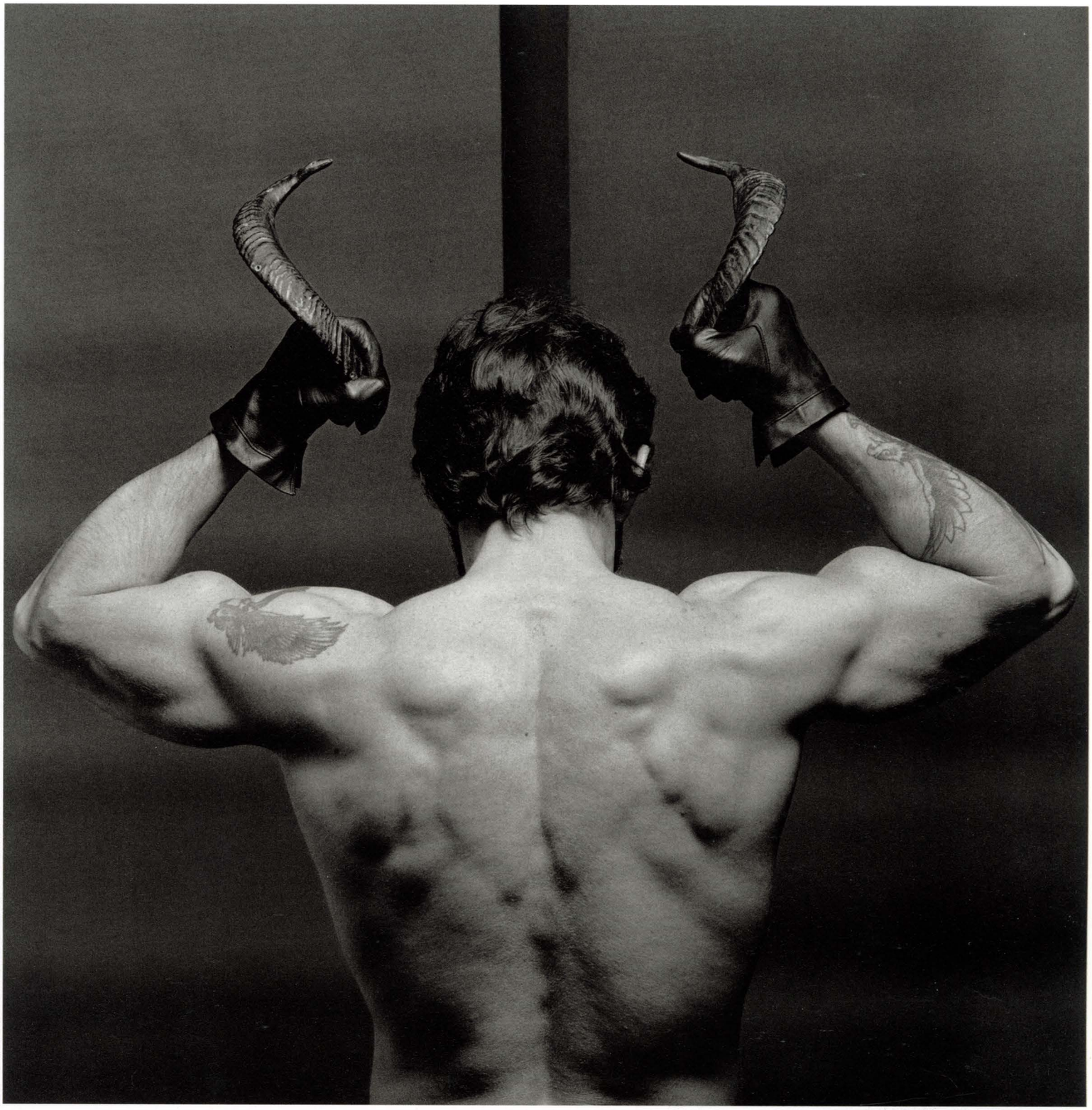
Frank Diaz, 1979



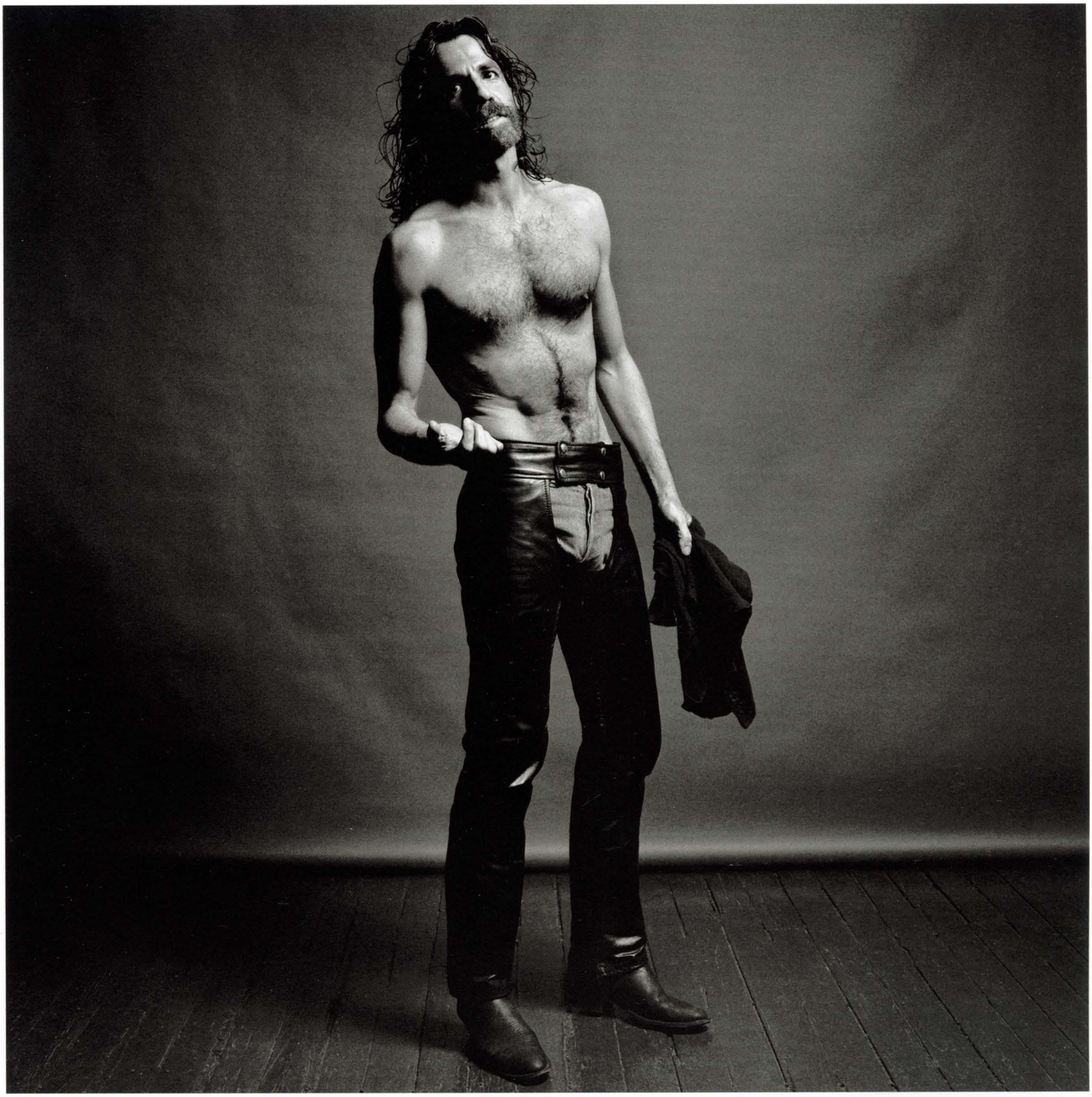
Frank Diaz, 1980



Bill King, 1980

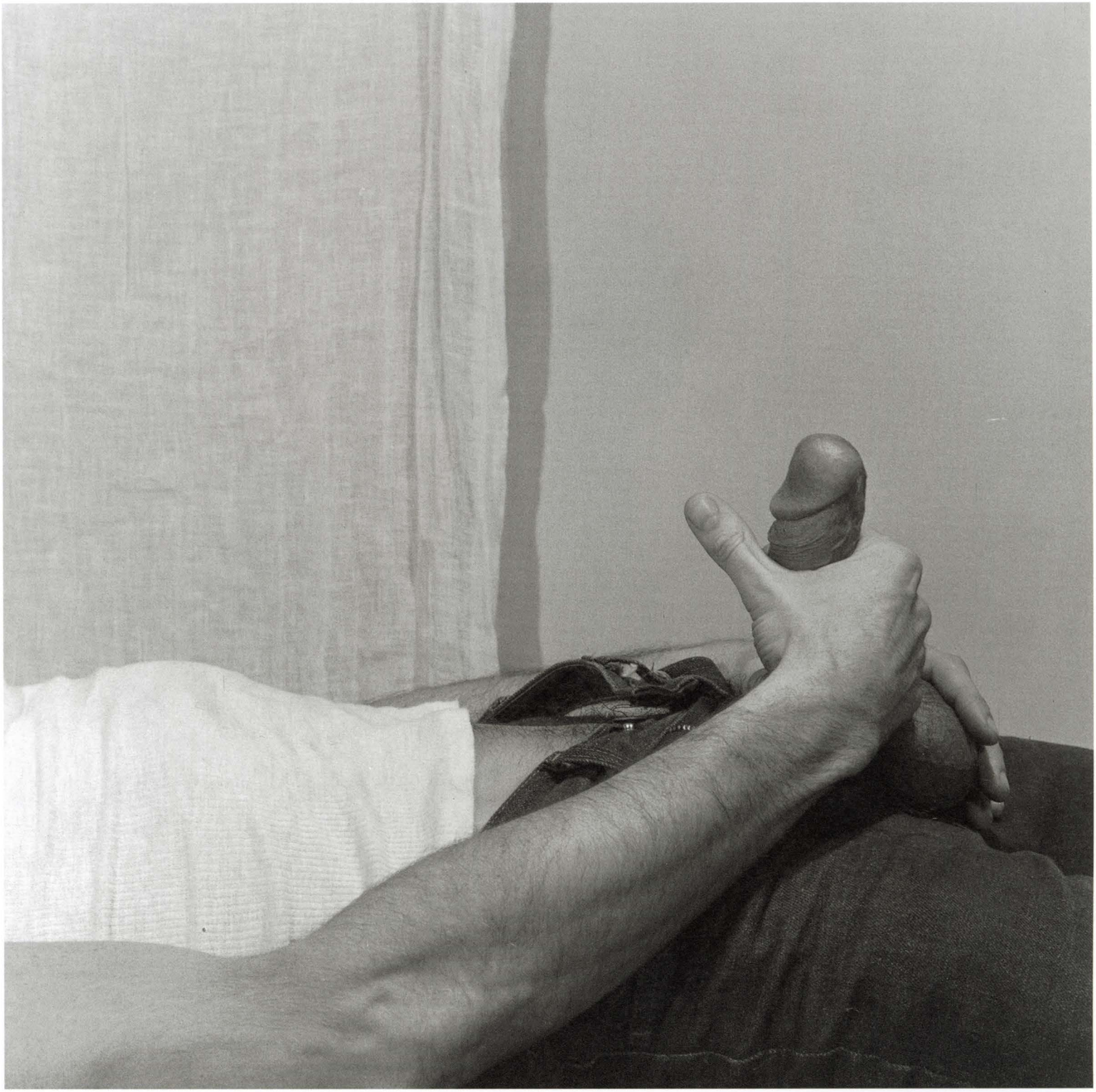
Bill King, 1980

Ramiros, 1979

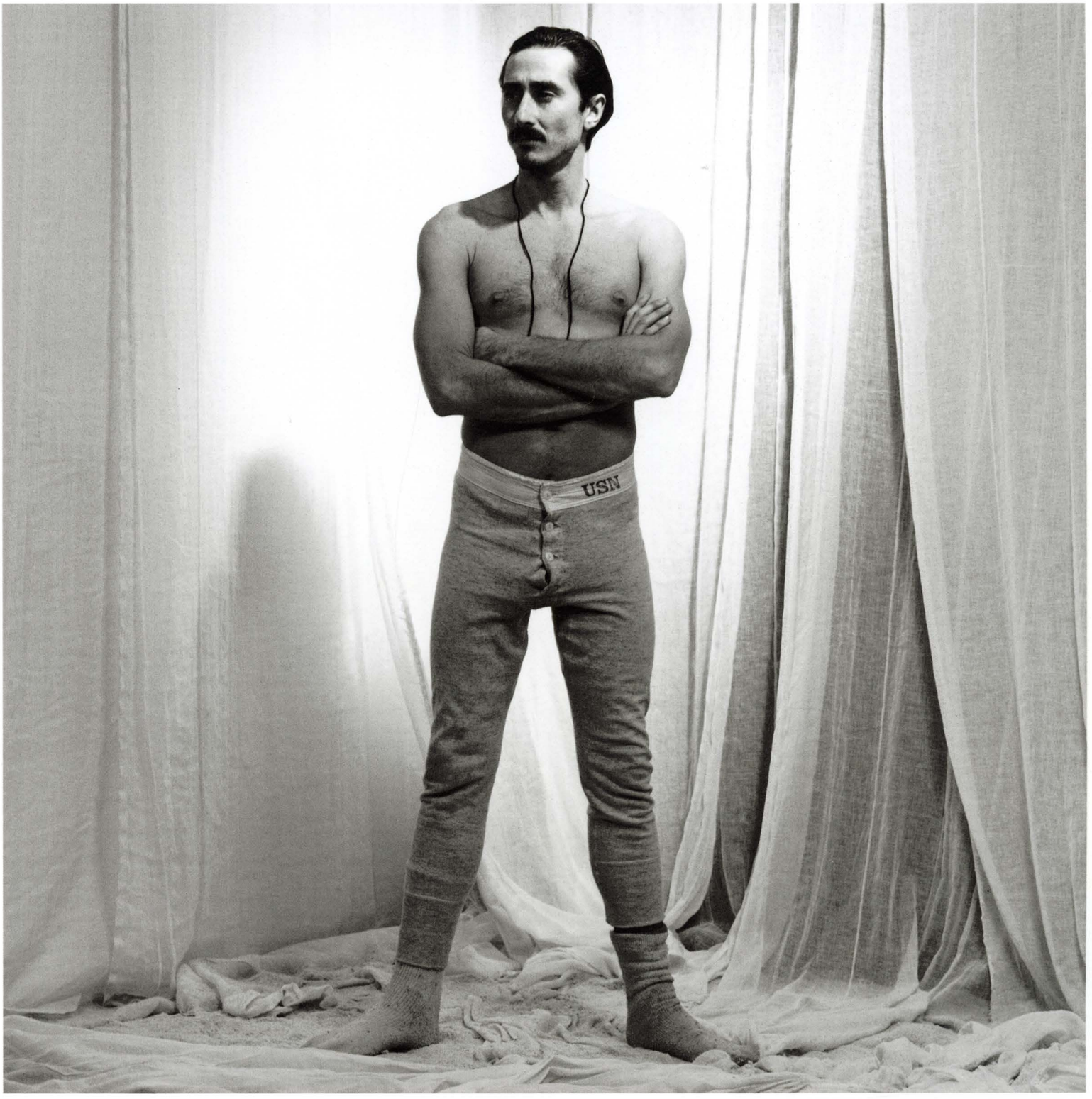


Untitled, 1979

Cock and Jeans, 1978



Larry, 1978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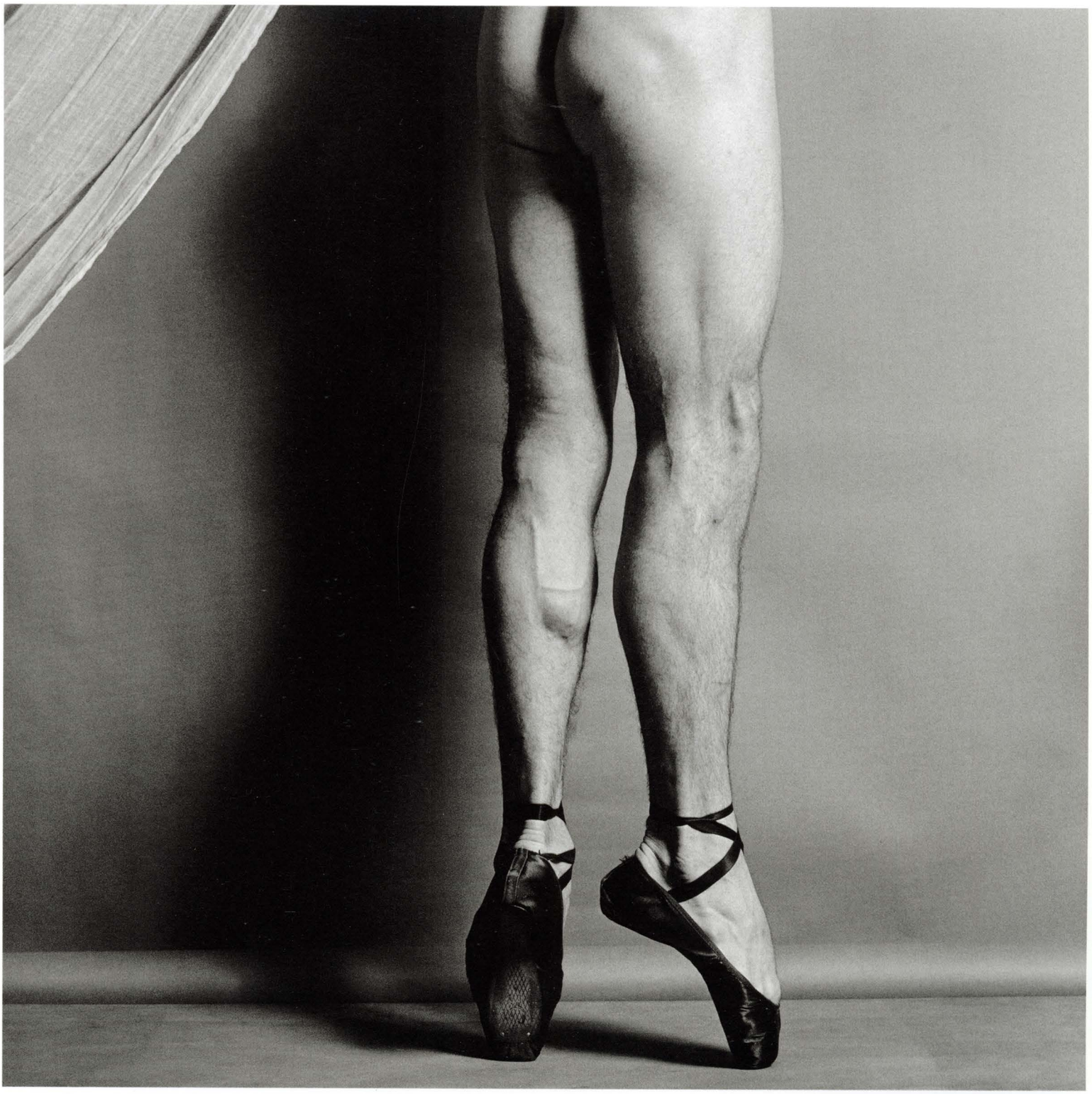
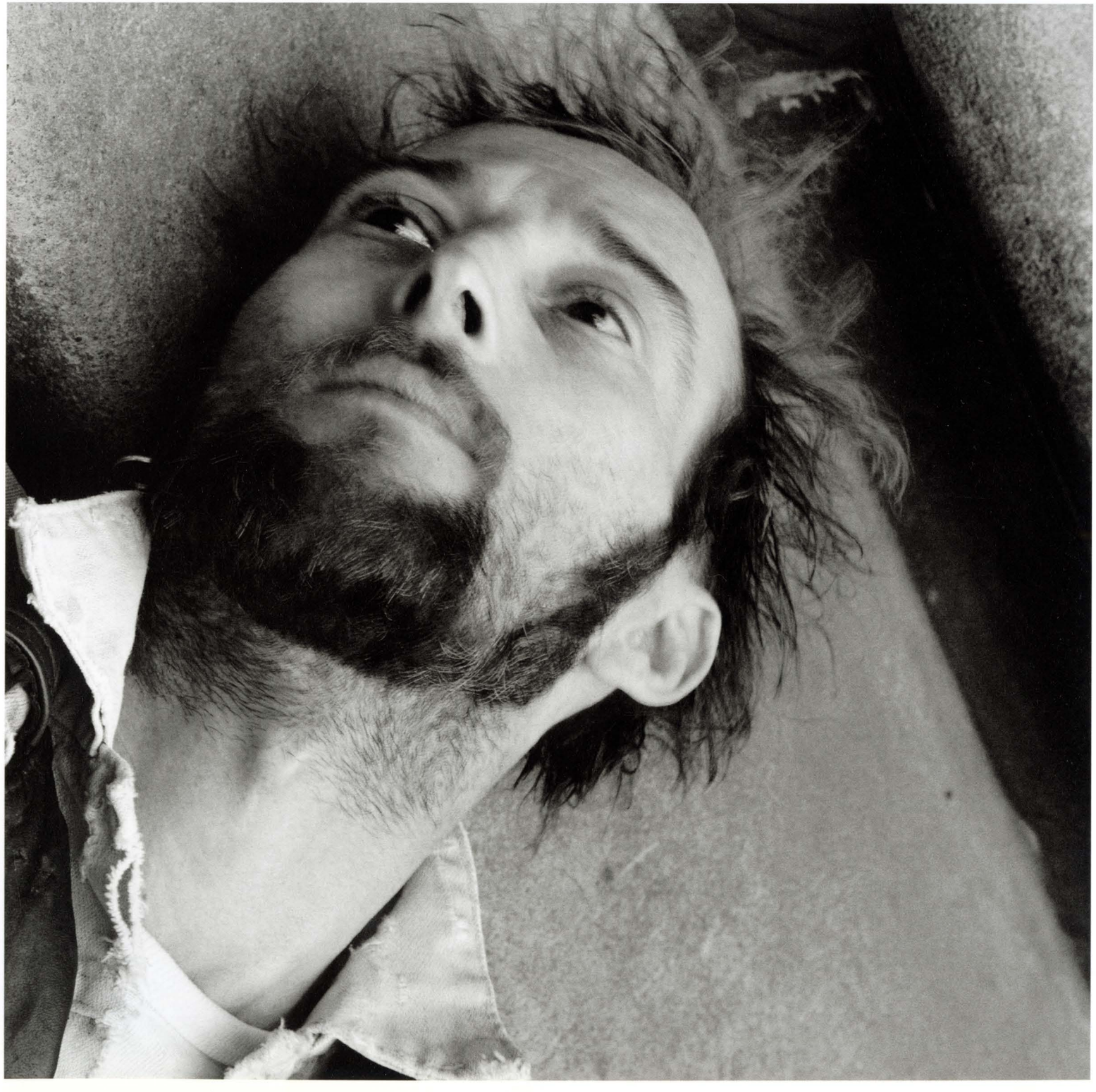
Phillip on Toe Shoes, 1979



Scott, NYC, 1978

Tony Hill, 1978



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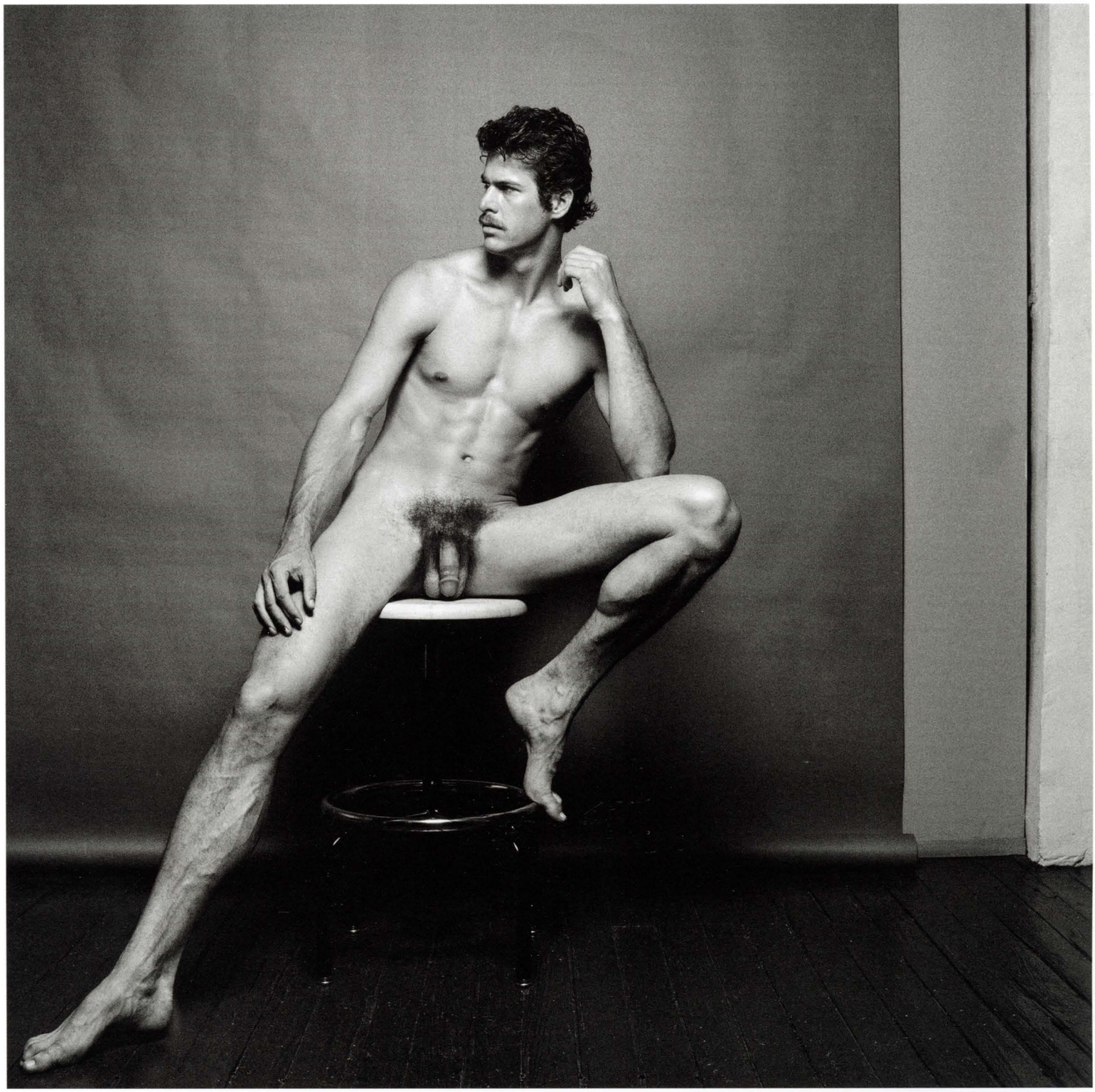

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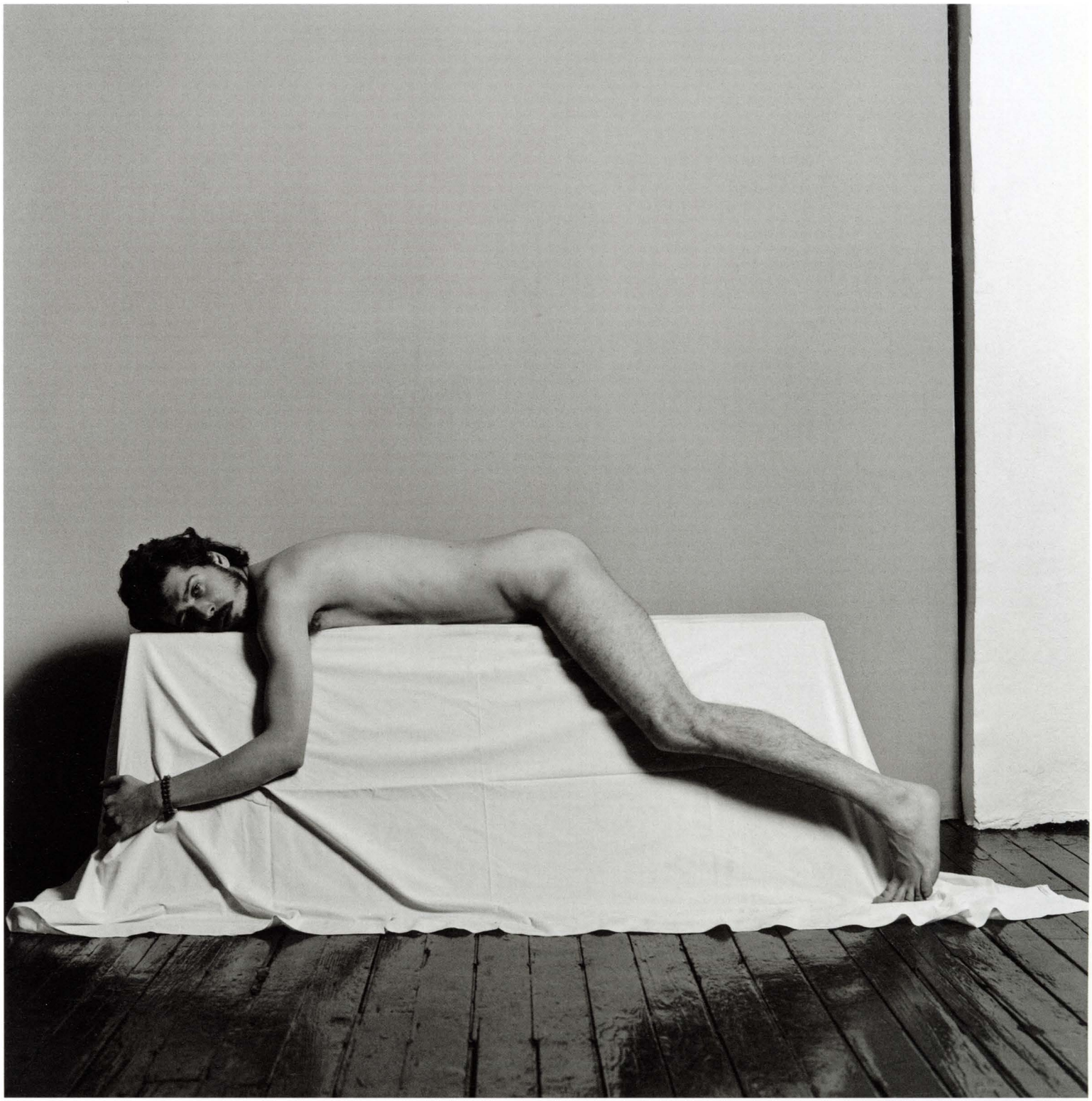
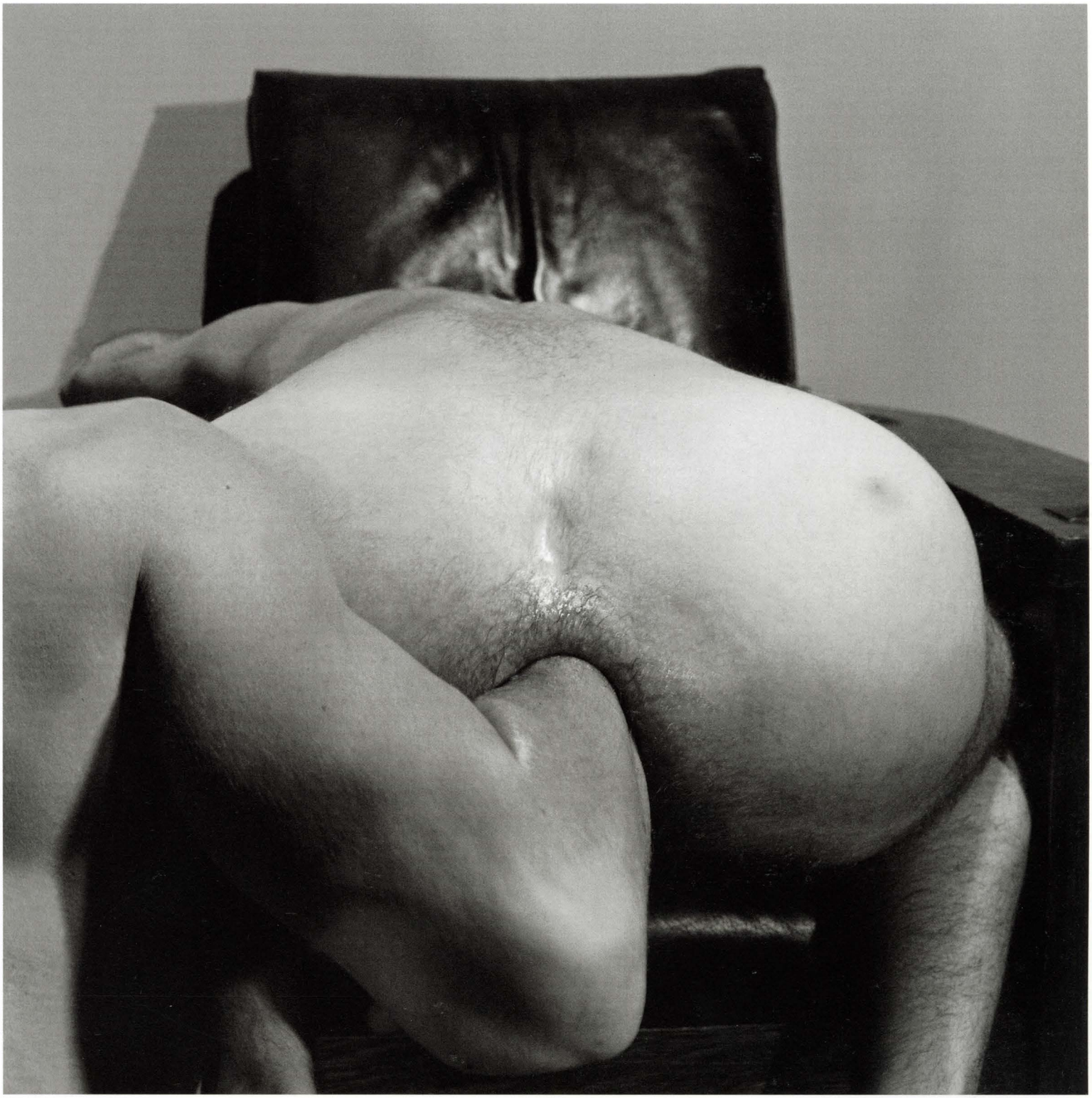


Larry Hunt, 1978

Helmut and Brooks, 1978



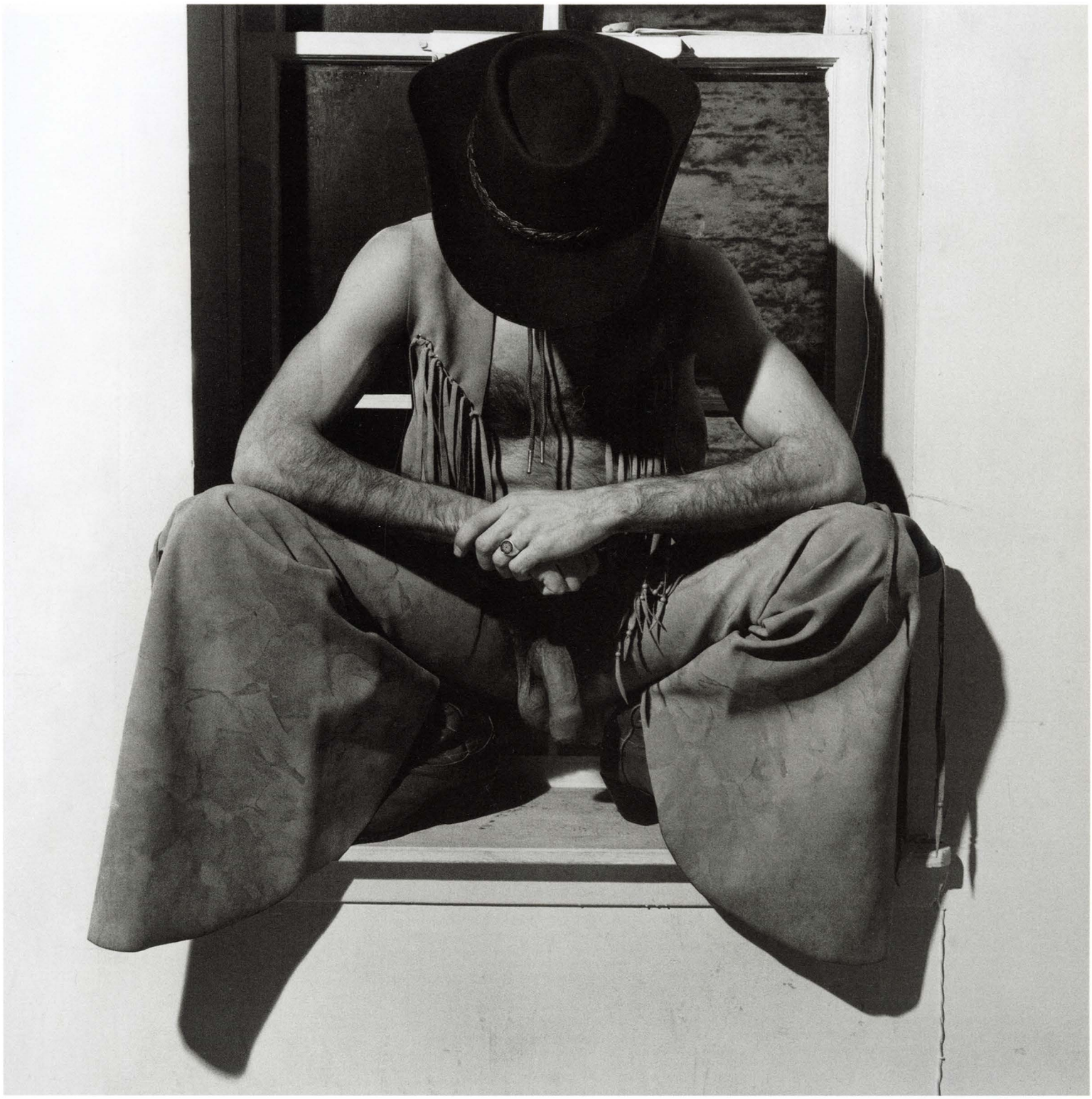
Fist Fuck, 1978

Double Fist Fuck, 1978

Fist Fuck, 1978

Colin Streeter, 1978

Victor Huston, 1979



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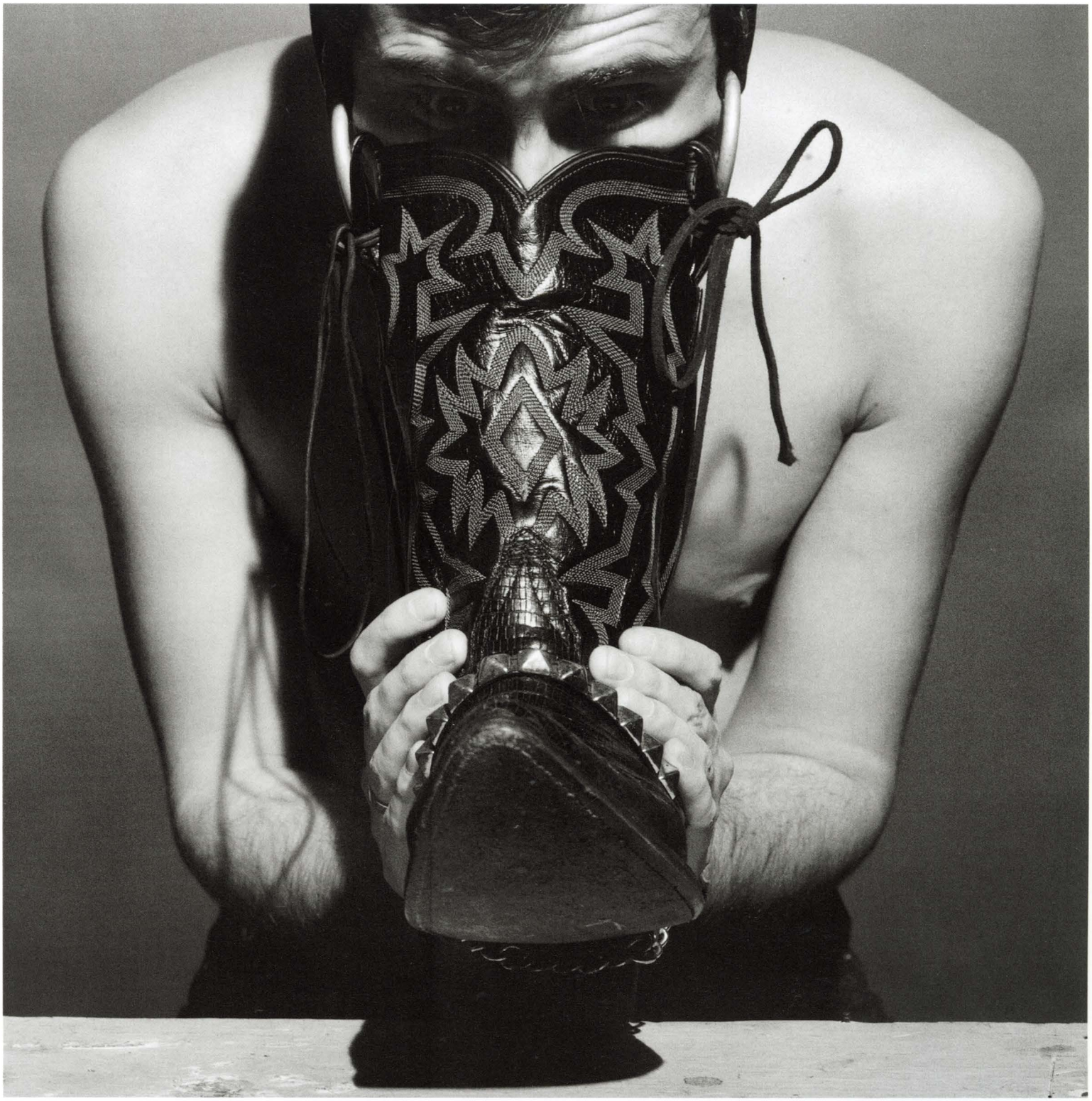
Patrice, 1977

Boot Fetish, 1979



Steven, Leather Crotch, 1980

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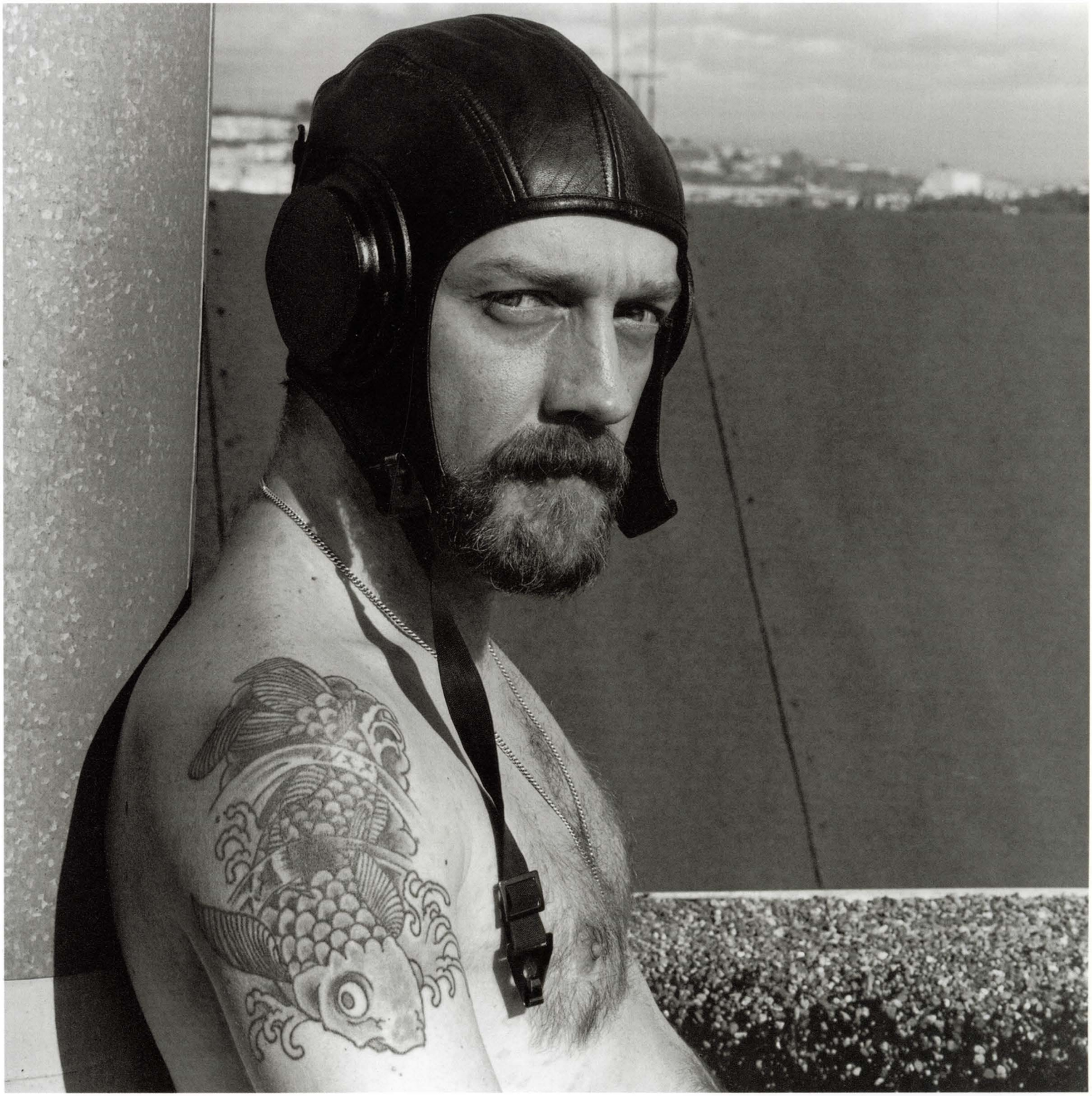

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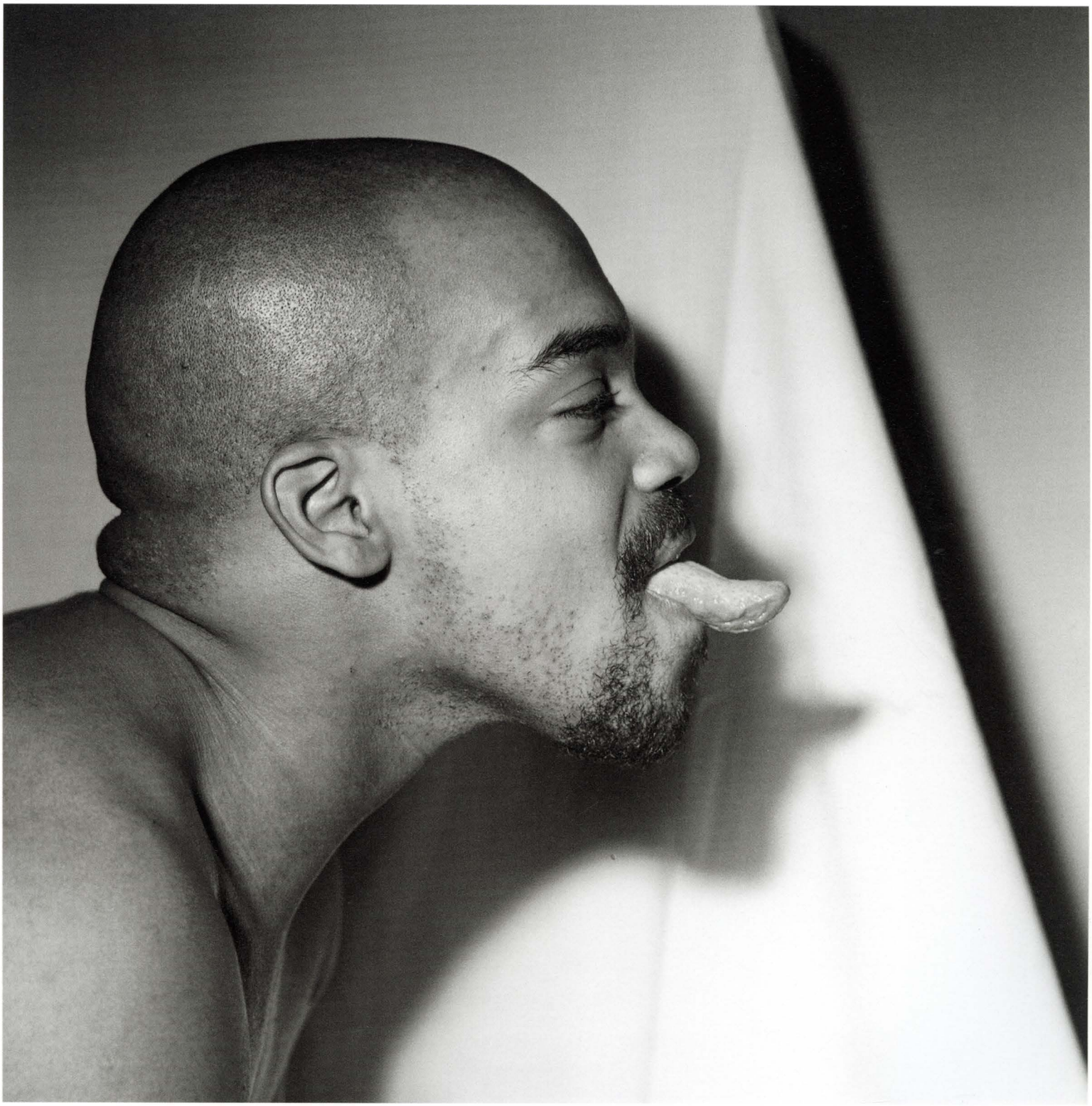

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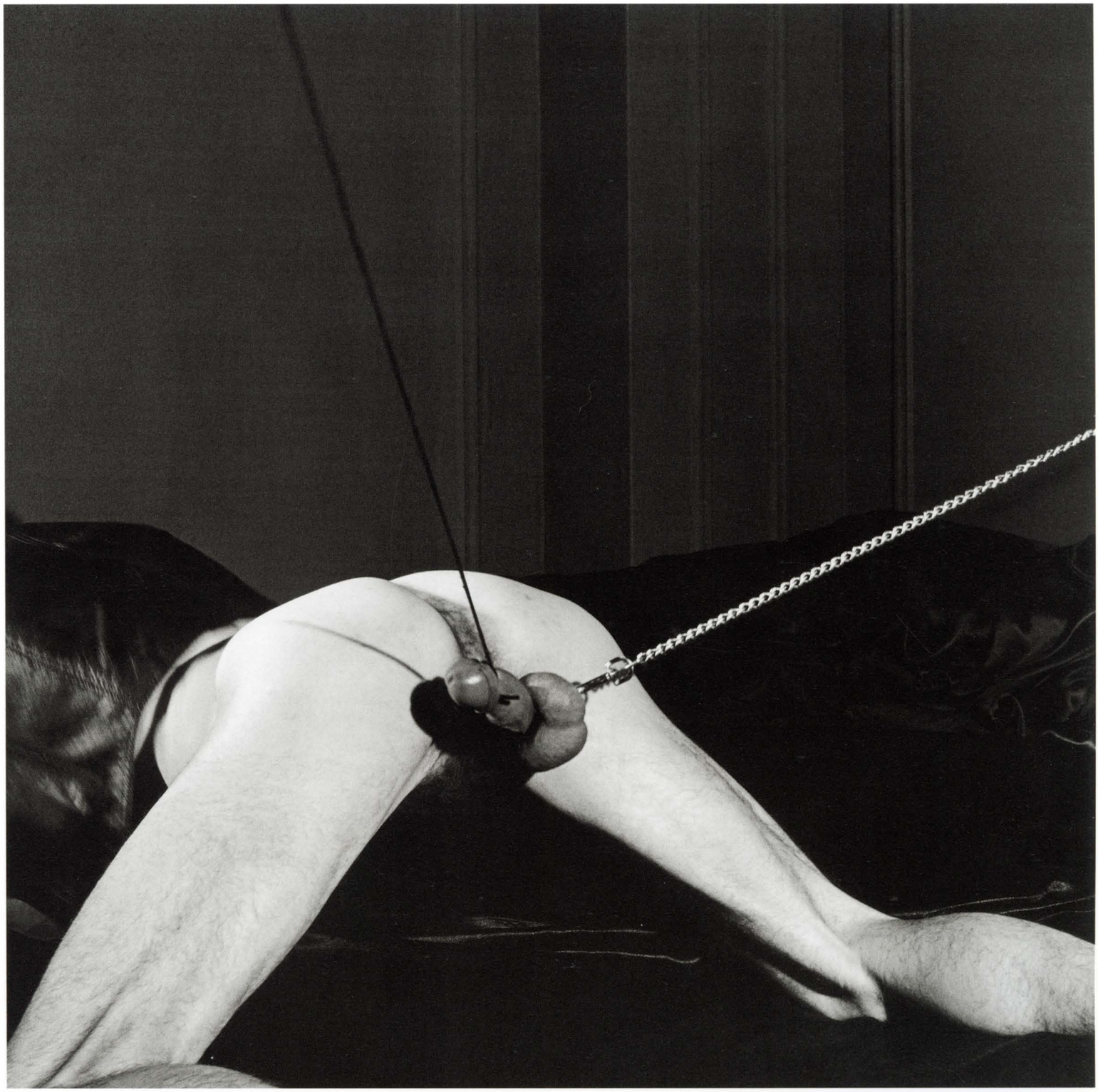
Ron Stevenson, 1978

Ron Stevenson, 1978

Ron Stevenson, 1978



Untitled, 1979

Untitled, 1979

Lou, NYC, 1978

Dominick and Elliot, 1979

Dominick and Elliot, Sucking Ass, 1979

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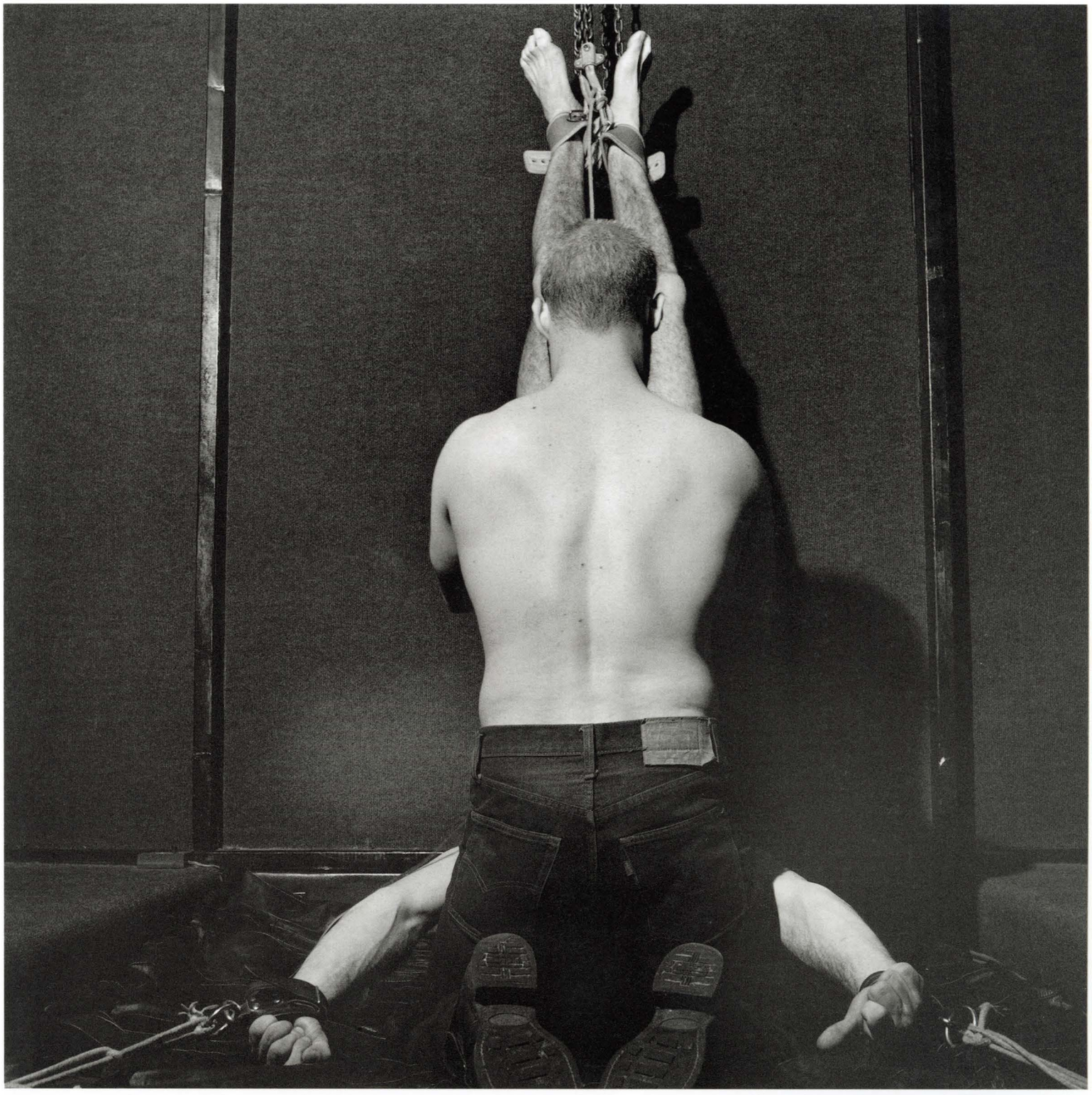
Dominick and Elliot, 1979



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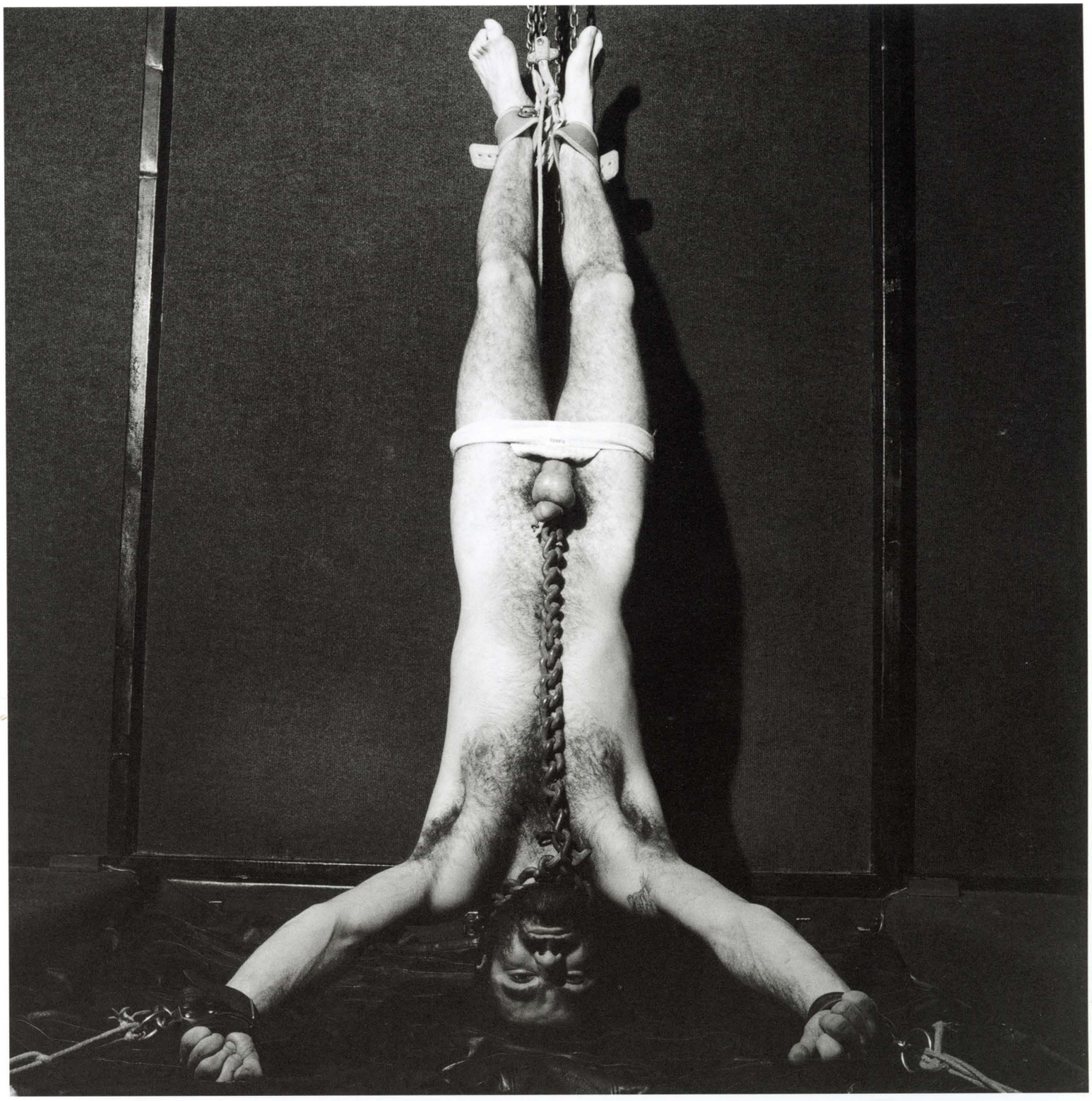

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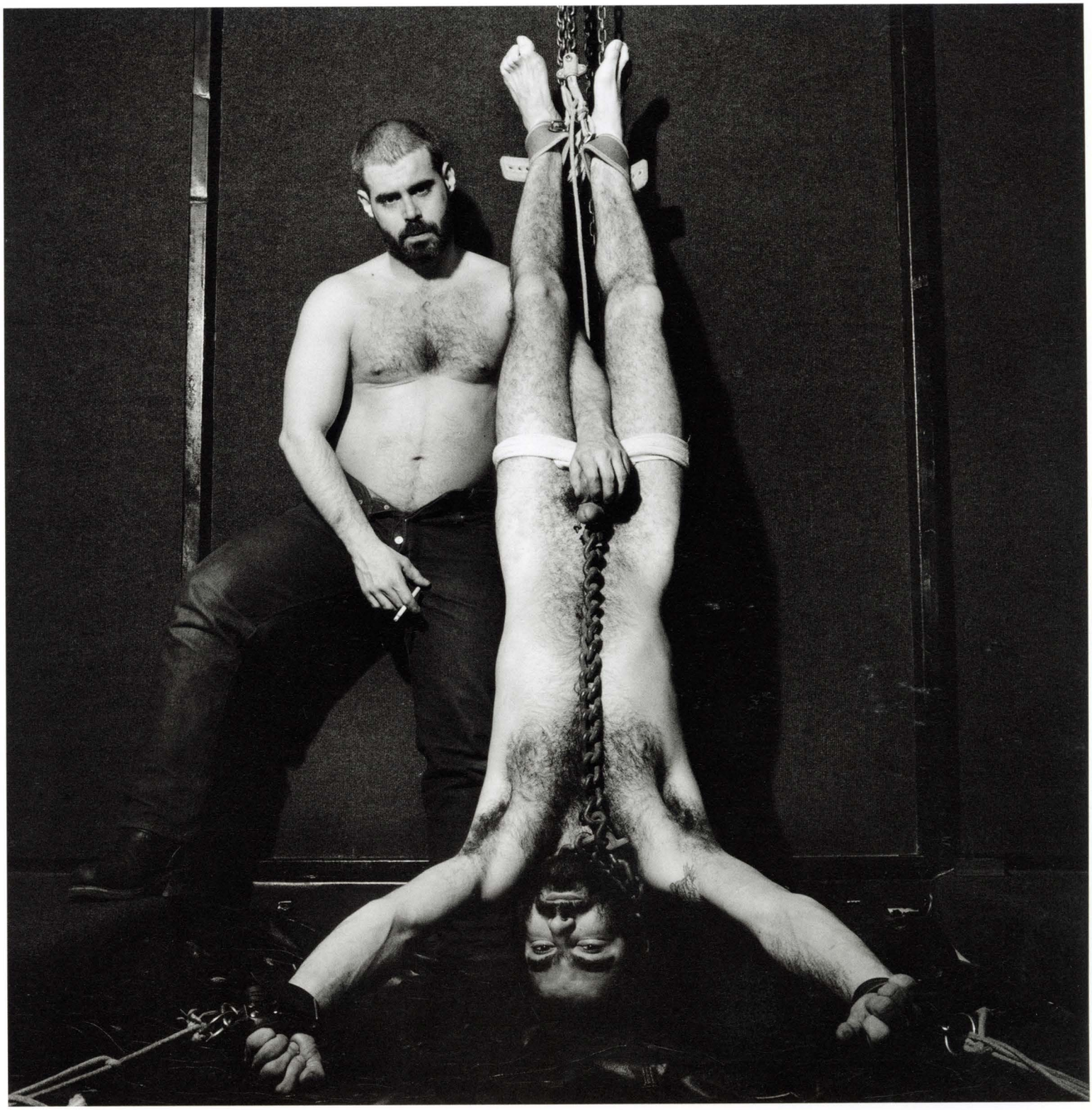

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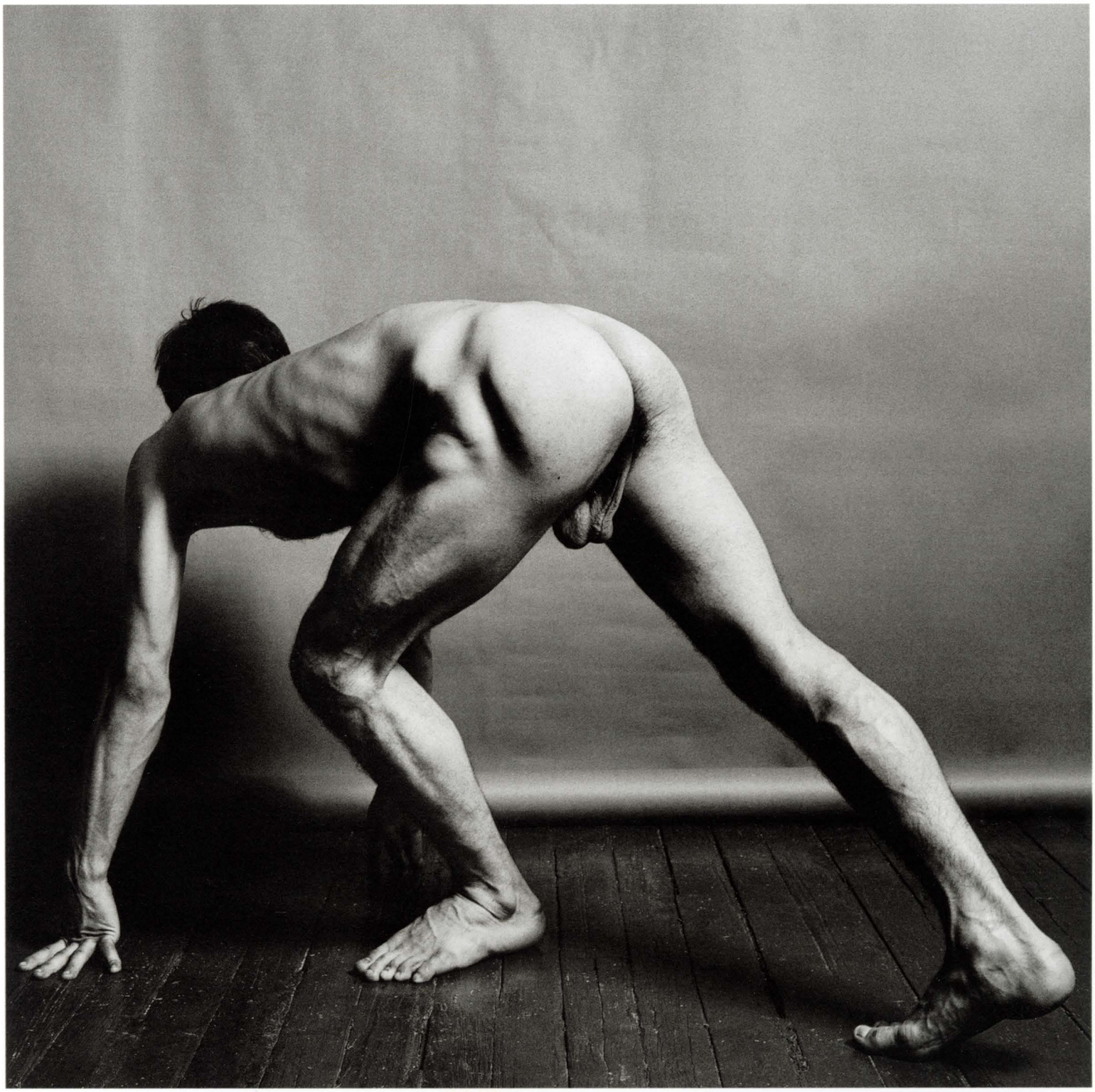
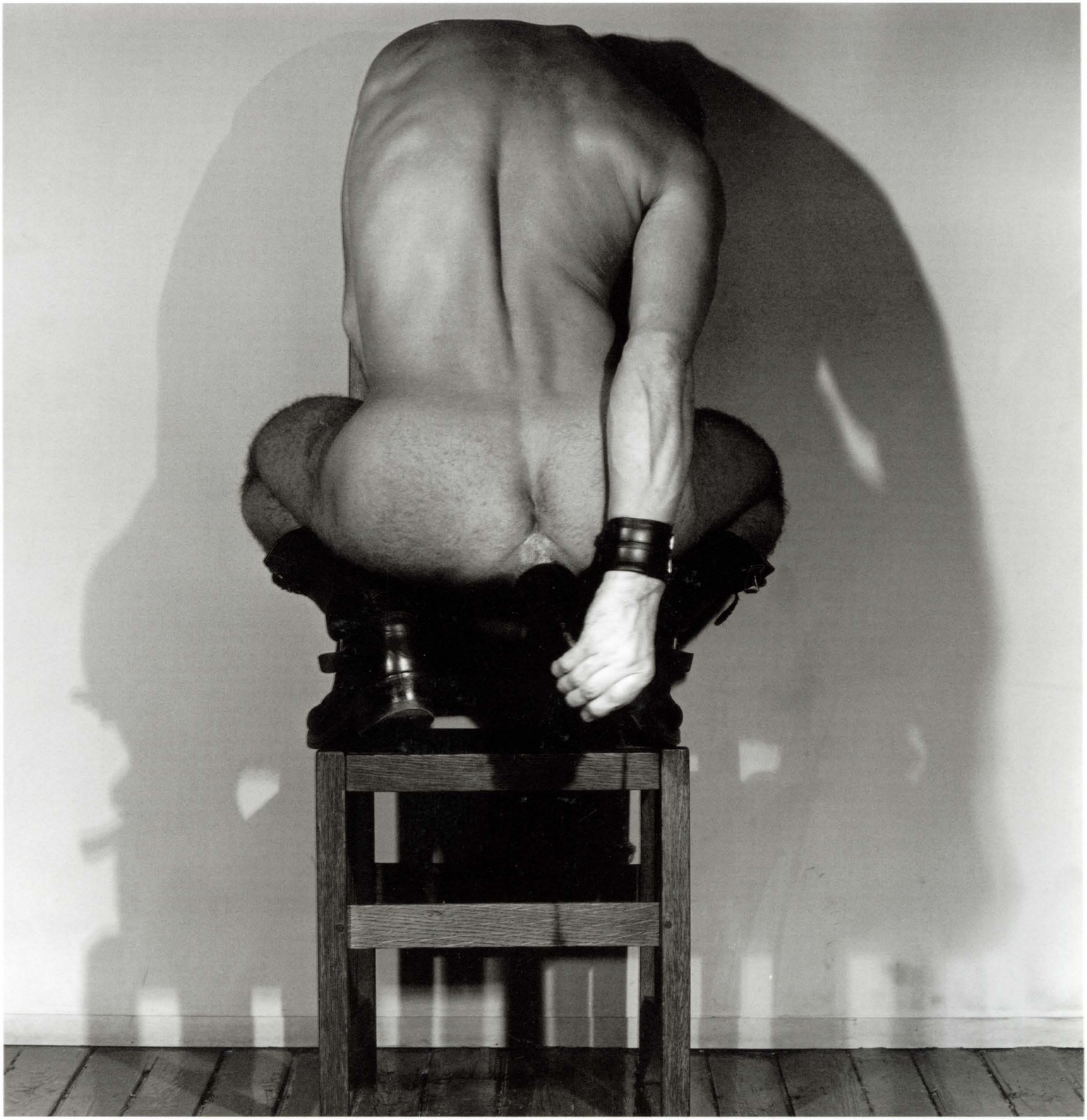


Ass Shaving, 1978

Ron Stevenson, Shaved Ass, 1978

John, NYC, 1978

John, 1978



Hans Gert, 1979

Self Portrait, 1975

American Flag, Fire Island, 1977

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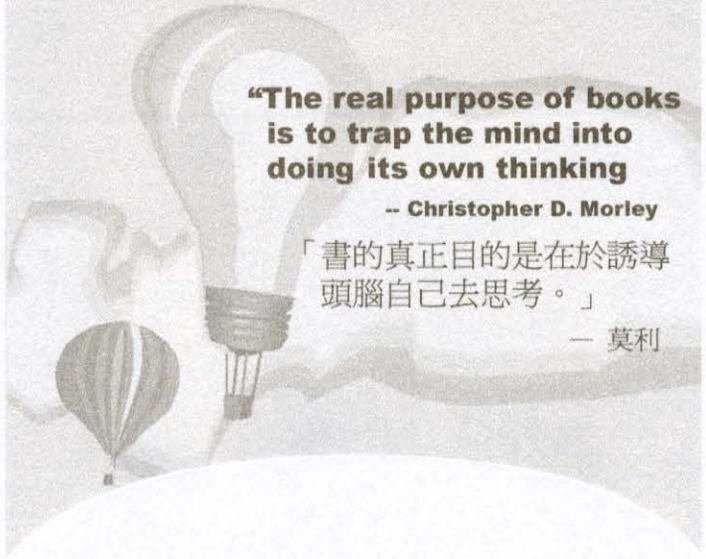

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